

A Complicated Surgery Will Take Place On The Beach Tonight

A Novel

Craig Warren Smith



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Abrachas Publishing

$$\sigma_{\mu\nu} \sim \frac{h}{\hbar} \sim t_{\mu\nu}, \quad \text{where } \sigma_{\mu\nu} = \frac{1}{2}(\sigma_{\mu}\sigma_{\nu} - \sigma_{\nu}\sigma_{\mu})$$

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The invisible is only what is too brightly lit.

Gerald Murnane, The Plains

You can nullify a fireball with a fireball.

Street Fighter II instruction manual

The handful of times I have woken on the opposite side of the world to those loved ones and acquaintances that I regularly spend my life with has caused within me two spontaneous reactions. Of these reactions the first is the most acceptable to speak aloud which is that I feel at those times a disquieting loneliness as I realise that when I am rising out of bed in the northern hemisphere my loved ones and acquaintances are already an hour into sleep in the southern hemisphere and when I am closing my eyes for the night they are hurriedly beginning the routines of the day. Sending a text message to my wife feels like sending a postcard a century ago when you might send and receive mail in the morning and the evening across the city. I send a text during the middle of her night and I perhaps receive a response some six or seven hours later.

During these times when I am away for work I visualise the world and the positions my wife and I are inhabiting on it. In the most recent instance I was on the surface of the earth on the West Asian peninsula in the city of Shanbudia waking up in a hotel room and looking out the open window in a broad arc across the equator towards my wife who I imagined was lying on her side and turned towards our open bedroom window in a state of deep rest as the surrounding population of our languid suburb of Hamilton on the East Coast of Australia joined her in dreaming counterclockwise to whatever reveries were being had over here.

Today is a couple of days before Christmas and I am now back in Australia and sitting at my desk beside a window and a lavender plant in a makeshift studio my wife and I built in the backyard of our house. My wife is asleep on her side and turned towards our open bedroom window. I have decided to plant myself here in the predawn to solve the problem of this coin in my hand. Say one side of the coin is day and the other side is night. It is almost an alchemical question. How does change occur. Or perhaps on one side of the coin lives a man who is not a father and on the other side of the coin the man becomes a father if you catch my drift. But the trick is to focus less on how side a turns into side b so much as considering how something that is two can also be one. Picture a bed with a woman lying on her side.

This is the first day in nearly three weeks that I have been up with a glass of orange juice and a head filled with intention since I returned from Shanbudia in a state of exhaustion that utterly floored me. For the past twenty days I have barely been able to eat or face daylight or do anything functional around the house without feeling the pressure of a rotating carousel of images pressed into the back of my eyes from the inside of my head which has caused me to feel absolutely wrecked. I hesitate to make this comparison but it is honestly as if tens of thousands of photographs on a smartphone were being swiped between my brain and my face with no capacity for me to stop them until some time during the day or the night when I spontaneously pass out and experience sometimes ten or twelve hours of dreamless sleep. There is debate between

my wife and my parents and colleagues and one health professional and I as to whether this is a bad case of jet lag or an illness picked up on the return flight or whether it is just your classic end of year burnout. For those who saw me during the closing dinner of the conference I attended in Shanbudia however there is no debate. They would say that this is simply what happens after a volcano erupts.

When I first saw my wife some fifteen years ago she was a cat balancing on the table of a dress shop. The way she twirled in my direction and looked at me with those big watermelon eyes like green flowers drifting through space in front of the sun. This is still the way I see her today every time she looks at me. She is a nurse carrying a samurai sword and she is a wooden fence covered in ivy that surrounds an old school hall filled with brass musical instruments. In the evening when she wraps a towel around herself and leaves the bathroom after having showered she is a five foot eight wet paintbrush ready to absorb the entire spectrum of light. She paints a fully realised simulation of our world on the reverse side of her eyes and too on my eyes which truth be told are more like concrete roundabouts on the outskirts of some industrial sector of the city not yet populated. Regardless she never fails to look deep into them and apply thick layers of gouache using her curiously unique interpretation of shading and tone that calms us at the end of the day.

My wife is due to give birth to our first child in a matter of weeks. We take evening walks around Newcastle because the upright movement helps her body to lengthen on the midsection. She feels the baby wake and move its

limbs inside of her when we footfall the streets and so we wander and talk baby names perhaps Mary perhaps Lucy. As we walk I collect little artifacts from the ground and put them in a bag to take home with us. I have found small flakes of paint from nearby buildings and curious leaves and seed pods and a little plastic wheel from a small toy.

When we arrive home and put dinner on our plates we sit in front of the television where I have a microscope connected to the input. As we eat I place one or another of the disjecta beneath the lens and we sit back and look at the immense canyons within the creases and lattice of fibres between which the light passes through. It delights us to realise what sort of universe rests beneath our feet that for the most part escapes observation. I think we find particular resonance with this entertainment because we imagine our baby soon living so close to the ground and engaging with the world to be found there. Never mind the caution of baby playing with bacteria. Put the dirt in your mouth and taste the real world.

Something happened over in Shanbudia that I need to process in order to move forward. When I was a young lad I would never have believed that one day I would be a thirty something man who would forget exactly how old he is and yet here I am. I look out the window towards the lavender and the emerging sunlight and for the life of me I cannot accurately calculate my age. It is not quite enough to say that three weeks ago I was a volcano that erupted and destroyed itself in the process. I could also say that I was a falcon who could not hear the falconer but honestly I would rather save the poetics and be very explicit about all

of this. My intention is to not be oblique and yet as much as I want to call things as they are and capitalise the tee in truth there is nonetheless an invisible word that my existence ardently leans into at all times which undermines all attempts at certainty. The way the glare from the sky smudges all details into one broad expanse of light. Those bare few possessions I take on my meandering walks so there is less to weigh me down to earth should I suddenly float up into a vaporised state of disintegration above these empty streets. I extend a profound friendship to all that is fleeting and undefinable and incomplete. Better living without geometry. Honestly to hell with geometry. Do not get me started. As a young lad I used to seek this feeling by listening of an evening to ambient music recordings which seemed composed in such a manner as to dissolve every note that followed the next. The sounds stepped through my headphones and into a world of photocopied dreams that were always running out of ink.

I used to believe there was a foundational concrete mathematical reality that must reside at the centre of the world to provide a platform for some unknowable unspeakable truth to stand atop in order to give our daily reality its solid form. It would take some years until I realised that each time I thought I could hear some truth at the centre of the world I was actually only listening to an echo rising from the centre of myself. A magma fueled reverberation of low droning bass notes phasing from my unknowing heart.

Aimless walks are a gift. These past four days I have been mostly successful enough at extracting myself

from the bedroom so as to topple out the front door and onto the street where I bounce down octaves towards the triangular shards of light in the quiet parts of the city. Newcastle is the seventh largest city in Australia and while I never thought I would be someone who is explicitly proud of where they live I actually do rather love the psychogeography of the place. Socially and politically it has its challenges like anywhere does but you forget all about that when you start meandering its bite sized labyrinth of streets that rise and fall between harbourside industry and lighthouse shine through to a beachscape shadowed by military fortifications and unpredictably silent tree lined corridors that lead through to empty cinemas and orchard courtyards out the back of hospitals that are slowly being converted into robotics warehouses.

I am still surprised at just how many spaces in the city I come across for the first time which for an area that only stretches some five square kilometres feels like a curious personal oversight. Just yesterday I visited the site of an old pub I had never seen before that is in the late stages of natural deconstruction. I researched it when I got home to learn that it was once a very popular local establishment until it became economically unviable. On their final night of trade a huge public gathering turned up to celebrate the end by rocking out to a band who were prematurely shut down by the police which subsequently triggered one of the biggest urban riots in the history of our country. The ground floor has just a few brick walls still standing in open air that house some basins and toilet bowls leading around the corner to a severely damaged

stairwell that connects the first floor of the pub where you ascend and are brought face to face with an enormous oak tree. The oak rises from the very middle of the pub into a balcony area that looks down to where the bar would have once been. I have no idea what sort of chemicals must be beneath the foundations but whatever is there has given the tree a supercharged boost of fertility to allow such immense growth in the twenty or so years since the pub has been closed.

It was some ten years ago that I woke up one morning and started getting ready for work before I unexpectedly found myself frozen in a state of suspended animation. As if on autopilot I somehow picked up a phone and spoke in a voice I had not heard before and told my workplace I was not feeling well. I then hung up and got dressed in comfortable walking attire and took a few dollars with me and without telling anybody I drove the five minutes it takes to reach the centre of Newcastle and just started to walk.

This next part I can describe to you with laser guided certainty as I recall it on such an immediate and visceral level. After a couple of minutes of walking away from my car and from my phone I started to breathe in a way I had not breathed in many years. Perhaps in a way I had never been consciously aware of. As a child it is possible I breathed this way but I did not know it at the time. I can still feel the way my body began internally easing and reclining as if my stomach and my liver and spleen and all the other internal organs in the vicinity were casually adjusting themselves so they could become more

comfortable. They had been squashed up against each other enduring a long overcrowded flight in economy class and now all of their tickets had been upgraded so they could stretch out and enjoy the legroom and the more frequent supply of blood and oxygen and water that they serve in the bodies premium seating area. It was absolute luxury. This feeling was a revelation to me at the time like little else I have experienced in my adult life. It taught me how to heal myself. Like a dog crawling under the house when wounded I sometimes need to disappear from active view while maintaining an easy forward walking pace.

And it is precisely this that is the source of the other spontaneous reaction I experience during those times I wake up on the other side of the world. It is a less socially acceptable reaction but is perhaps more psychologically resonant which is to say that at these times when I am alone in a foreign city I feel a rarified sense of freedom. The feeling of being outside the otherwise terminal grip of responsibility to incoming phone calls and messages because while I am awake in this new time zone I know that business hours are finished for the day back at home and as a result I am answerable to nobody. In this state I can get dressed in comfortable attire and take a few dollars with me for food and water and then I can head out through the front of the hotel and just walk. I can give myself over to the lightness of a momentum that holds no serious intention of direction and instead just allows me to fall forwards in the most loose and uncertain of ways through ambiguous veins of urban passage without any discernible pattern. My steps disappear me from any

former lines of contact with the outside world. And by outside world I mean my goal is to reach a nonposition. If I were a directional arrow on a digital map I would aim to blink off the side of the screen beyond the city beyond the beach and even beyond the ocean without any ability to be recovered.

The evening after I met a twenty year old medical intern at a Street Fighter arcade video game tournament who I would later go on to marry but who at the time was just a girl I was in massive sensory debt to I remember sitting on a train traveling from Newcastle to the rural pastureland of Maitland nearby where she lived. In the carriage I began to write the outline of a story that I would go on to plan and tinker with in a condition that fifteen years on still remains unfinished. I gave it the name of the first sentence I wrote on my pad that day which was

A Complicated Surgery Will Take
Place On The Beach Tonight.

The story opens on two protagonists standing on the rooftop of Bolton Street car park in the middle of Newcastle in the dark of night. When I first introduce Katita our best guess is she has something to do with the medical profession but there are no certainties here. Yes she has a first aid kit strapped to her belt but then she also has a bastardised samurai sword hanging from her back. She looks ready for war as she wears a flak jacket covered in red desert sand but then she is also wearing thigh high socks and yes those are kitten heels all shiny and red and

highly reflective in the moonlight. Red is a theme here. Her red hair and the cross on her first aid kit and the sand on her body and it could just be dry tears having mixed with the dirt on her face but it would not be out of the question to say there has been a film of deep red blood wiped across it not long ago.

It is little mystery why I wrote that at the time. Analogy is the core of all cognition. My twenty year old mind was creating an object of fetishisation as an offering to my memory of the evening prior when I asked a redhead medical intern to come out with me for dinner and a dance after finishing up at the arcade tournament. I was playing with the intoxication of opposites for example what happens when you bring medical care and violence together into the fantasy of falling for a stunning stranger. The reason I then wrote myself into the story as a blindfolded man sitting in a wheelchair holding a hand cannon is less clear and is more prone for concern.

Leif has his head hung low towards his chest. He is likely unconscious and we see that he is covered in cuts and bruises with bandages wrapped tight across his eyes. Strapped to his chest is a hacked together pacemaker with a blinking red diode keeping a beat and lighting up his floral shirt as it blows open in the breeze casting a rose sunset hue on the hibiscus skyline that ripples across the fabric. Leif does not look in great shape. His chest rises and falls in accordance with at least a vague rhythm of life which is positive but then there is something else. The way he clutches a massive hand cannon resting in his lap. He grips it as though he hopes to fuse it with his bones.

The content of the story has been causing me immense concern not least because of horrendous current geopolitical events that I first became aware of in Shanbudia on the morning that I would later in the day become a volcano. If news algorithms have seized control of the narrative of the world and have curated where our fears are heading next they have also become the dreamers of the ghost stories we begged to be told since we all stapled our brains together and agreed to never sleep again.

In anticipation of being a father I can tell you that my mind is being whipped into new structures I would have never thought possible. Not given the sort of entertainments that I previously sought stimulation from and hence the model of the world that for a lifetime I have been mirroring behind my eyes. Because let us make no bones about this. The only way a thought can exist is when it mirrors itself against its equivalent. Like I wrote before it is only through analogy that anything can be. As a newborn you only gain access to your first discovered concept after relating it to an analogous second. The voice of your mother only becomes what it is when you hear your own cry in comparison. All of which is to say that I need to come to terms with how much I want to resonate with the aesthetics of redhead nurses wielding swords and the sort of kaleidoscopic sensory pleasures those artifacts of violence illuminate in my head and how much I ethically want to take responsibility for the reality being made manifest in the world of my pending child.

It has been a big year. When I was invited by the United Nations to run a workshop for government officials

and psychologists and architects in Shanbudia with a focus on understanding how children might be able to play in the quote unquote cities of the future I said of course I would be happy to. As it turns out the subtext of the workshop was to provide justifying theory on ways that city planners might attempt to keep modern urban children healthy enough to survive the overclocked networks of data and fossil fuels that pump through the central business districts of the world which are only really currently sanitised enough to allow microprocessors the capacity to breathe and vibrate within bank vaults that are held far above the smog layer of our troposphere.

Until this past decade the recommended approach to pediatric nurture was for all children to move into the countryside where they could be amongst paddocks and trees and animals and ponds and of course those big open skies beneath which they could breathe freely and run around and roll down hills which according to a number of longitudinal studies allow children their best chance to grow into physically and emotionally healthy adults. However as we know the countryside has ceased to be what it once was. Most outer geographies and their skylines have now been repurposed as repositories for cloud storage. Pastures now hold warehouses filled with hard drives that are powered by the kinetic movements of strategically grown nodes of surrounding birch trees beside which ponds and river systems are dipped with the cooling systems of thirty eight thousand tonne steel tubes that contain modules which we are told can only function beneath the surface of rural spring water lest they stutter and

overheat and set the landscape ablaze. To be a farmer is to be a data farmer and this has become the new industrial standard across all pastoral quarters of the quote unquote developed world.

I accepted this workshop invitation for two reasons. The first is that it is my area of professional expertise and with a child of my own on the way I ethically want to be able to raise them in a world where I can say baby point to mama and baby point to the bird in the tree rather than can you point to all the shopfronts in this picture and can you identify all the traffic lights so you might prove to a robot that you are not a robot while we collectively teach autonomous vehicles to populate the streets baby. The second more selfish reason for accepting the invitation is that I had never been to Shanbudia and I looked forward to being able to walk the city alone after the workshop before heading back home. I knew some colleagues from universities and think tanks around the world would be there too so there was a motivation to see them for the period of the workshop and catch up on how they all were.

The terrorist event that happened back at home while I was away is not solely the antecedent for what caused the trip to shift from being a fairly routine work engagement into something that utterly transfigured my humanity but it is at the very least a major piece in the puzzle. Still now today at this desk beside the lavender and the emerging sunlight I am unable to look directly at the terrorist event without feeling that I want to take hold of my wife and our unborn child and disappear into whatever

anonymous quarter of the world still exists for us to become noncitizens in. I visualise an apartment building in a city covered in black snow in an outpost of a country that does not even have an online encyclopaedia entry written about it. Nobody knows my wife and our child and I live there. We do not turn on the lights at night and during the day we go out to get food under the cover of fog. In our apartment we all huddle together and hold each other and on special occasions we make our way to an abandoned shopping centre a short trudge through the snow where we run around the empty corridors and slide down the bannisters of the stairwells and fall asleep together on the carpet of a long closed department store where we sleep and where we smile in every dream.

Let me start to say now what I have wanted to say from the beginning. On the night after the final workshop there was a dinner hosted by the United Nations where my colleagues and I sat outside in the dining area of the hotel we were all staying at. The tables were arranged poolside in reach of decorated hookah pipes and pewter trays overflowing with tapas and glasses of wine beneath the reclining arch of the most immense skyscrapers I have ever been in the presence of while dub heavy jazz bumped across the ground in a manner that we all kept debating as to whether it was live music being performed by a group playing in shadows on the other side of the pool or whether it was just a very high quality sound system playing some very cool recorded tunes. While everybody was chatting happily I was quiet and filled with a storm of conflicting emotions that I could not get a handle on.

I wanted to be there at the dinner and I wanted to be socially engaged yet an internal wall held me back. That morning on the news I watched in horror as an act of concentrated violence drilled itself into my mind. By all appearances the perpetrators were only a couple of years younger than me and even though the background details of the assailants were just starting to filter through it was already apparent that they had been raised on the same catalogue of images and entertainments and collective insider agreements that I had been raised on.

After three days of workshops on creating synthesised versions of nature for the children of the future I was thinking about old friends and teenage dreams and I was listening over dinner to these colleagues in Shanbudia compare linguistic devices across African and European languages and how shared adjectives related to the sort of foods that were prepared for them by their parents and grandparents when a warm smiled colleague leant across the table in order to guide me into the conversation. She asked if I had been working on my story lately and whether I could tell the group about it. That is the moment I lost control. I began speaking in quiet tones that very soon turned into blaring sirens as thoughts and intentions battled to leap out of my mouth and become real in a disastrous crescendo of broken ideas. I stood on the tables and chairs and spoke madness and then I fell in the pool and disappeared from the earth in a crumble of heat.

Only now am I starting to get some sense of what happened in the twenty four hours that followed this event. I could say that I walked across Shanbudia and then flew

home to Australia which would be entirely true except that it would be like saying that fish are simply birds born on the bottom of the sea. There is a lot more to it than that.

Two occurrences that brought my fleeting performance at the dinner into stark physical consumables of regret were the following. The first is that as I woke up after landing back in Australia and checked my phone for messages with its last one percent of battery life I saw a note with an attachment from a colleague that told me they had filmed most of my eruption and that it was the most unbelievable thing they had ever seen and that if I wanted them to destroy their copy of the video they would but in the meantime they at least wanted me to see it for myself. Directly after receiving this video link I realised I had a couple of squares of paper resting on my stomach. They were pages from a pad branded with the logo of the airline. They contained handwritten words anonymously saying hello and that whoever they were they had recognised me from the other night at the hotel where they had also been staying and yes they had witnessed my performance. I confronted them so much that when they saw me on the plane fast asleep for almost the entire fifteen hour flight back to Australia they felt like they had to write a poem about the eruption. They actually called it a portrait of an eruption. I looked around the plane and could recognise nobody as everyone was busy pulling bags down from overhead lockers and filing out the cabin doors into the cold morning Sydney air outside. As unreal as all this must sound it is nonetheless the very real catalyst for this bundle of writing I am here putting together.

I want to share here a testament and explanation of the circumstances surrounding my eruption and then I am going to share an unedited transcript of exactly what I said and did as per the video recording my colleague sent me. The video has been run through a piece of accessibility transcription software and I am just going to provide a direct copy and paste of what it contains as I could not possibly put myself through manually writing out what came from my mouth and my body as I dissevered the evening with my teeming compulsion. My intention is to get all of this written down and processed before my wife gives birth. While I am pleased to be home and out of bed and at my desk here in good health I am nonetheless confronted by the fact that I am a man still fundamentally stuck between stations. Stuck somewhere beside side a and side b. When my child comes along I want to have well and truly worked the geometry of this dilemma out so I can be who I need to be in order to face what is to come. After all what is geometry but an analogy for the sand that keeps us from flying into the sea. But first of all let me tell you how I met my wife.

Newcastle Station is a skeleton horse made of iron kneeling down inside a broken clock. There are matrices of high metal in runs of chromatic rusting that weave in and out of wooden girders and loose rail wires across four empty platforms. Sunset is around an hour away although it feels to me like sunrise as I have slept all day after the biggest night of my life. This is two thousand and one and I just turned eighteen a few months earlier and even today at my desk I can still feel my heart pulsating with historic surplus energy as I think back to those moments in which the train pulled away from the station towards the rural pastureland of Maitland nearby where the cause of this surplus lived.

This cause who is now my wife and who on that evening in October two thousand and one changed everything for me. A plane flies over the carriage of the train and instinctively I slink back against the seat and remind myself of where the exit doors of the carriage are and what my best approach might be should I need to dive out of the carriage and fumble my way to safety beneath a bush somewhere. The train passes through Broadmeadow and Adamstown with the warm descending light outside raising highlights of dust that have long coated the carriage windows. I would have been wearing and carrying what I always wore and carried in those days. Jeans and a short sleeve brown button shirt and a faux leather postal mes-

senger bag with a notepad and pen and bottle of water and on this occasion I remember too it held a small aluminium bee automaton created and sent to me a week earlier by my dear friend Les.

Of course too I had a cassette player and headphones with me. Even though it was two thousand and one I still had a cassette player because I liked creating mixtapes and I did not yet own a compact disk burner. The internet was still quite new to family homes and on a dial up modem I would scan through at a glacial pace a network of sparsely coded music websites built of small blinking text. Some of the pages felt like perhaps only two or three other people had ever visited them and indeed on some of these pages there were number tickers that said you were visitor number twelve to the page for example.

At times the visiting of these websites felt like standing in a suburban backyard that had been owned by only a single elderly couple who built the place sixty years earlier and maybe upon the flat concrete near the garage and the clothesline where the sun descended in unfiltered brackets there had stood across the past half century only a handful of other people. A mechanic fixing a lawn mower or the children from a neighbouring yard retrieving a ball that flew too high. Or someone like me who wandered into the yard when the couple had passed away and considered how intensely monastic the space was. How many silent string quartets could play noteless odes to loneliness there. I feel that I was likely first imagined in a space like that pre zygote.

Antithetical to these muted daytime reveries were the strange internet radio stations that broadcast during the middle of the night from who knows where that I would search out and absorb the playlists of with their experimental electronic tunes I would immediately dub to cassette. Later when I would listen to the tracks I had no idea what any of the tunes were called which in my mind made the music all the more exotic and lush. One of the radio websites I remember presented a testimony from a recent listener who wrote that they were a fireman from Poland who listened to the broadcast during late nights at the fire station and how they thought it would be pertinent to provide all young children across the country with laptop computers so these children could start creating electronic melodies just like those played on the site which would in time give rise to a new folk music for the country and out of this music would come new folk dances and fairy tales and all the rest. So many times in recent years I have searched across the internet for the text of this statement in case it was saved on a website somewhere but it appears to have disappeared forever.

I feel that all music at its core is always attempting to emulate the human voice. The central sound of our human existence is the sound of our name being said by our mother and to go a little further I think that our name and indeed all words that evolved out of our names are themselves an attempt to emulate the rhythm of the heartbeat we share for a time with our mother. Beach for example is one thump of a heartbeat. Surgery is three thumps and not only is it three thumps but it is a very

particular kind of heartbeat. It is a heartbeat that is attempting to skip a beat perhaps due to adrenalin or some other chemical or condition. That being understood I would encourage you to listen to any piece of music whether it be a percussive techno dance banger or a noisy rocker with walls of feedback or a gentle piano nocturne and listen to how the sound sources are attempting to mouth a word. Listen to the notes of the piano as they try to mimic lips and tongue. The guitar and drums as they do their best mimicry of consonants and vowels. Singing is obviously an easy give away but do cast your head back to the first slaps on the stretched skins of animals and imagine a name being cast into the air.

Let us recap the formula. Your name is the product of the sound of a beating heart. Music is created the moment an instrument begins to emulate the voice of your mother articulating your name the way she heard it when you were a heart beating inside of her stomach. When we listen to music the water in our brain is stimulated to ripple in shapes that form the shape of our name. Or similar.

There were maybe three or four other people in the train carriage that afternoon and I remember clearly how I sat back in my seat and closed my eyes in order to meditate in the way I had once been taught. While breathing deeply I would say to myself that the first breath is just a breath. I would say the second breath is a chance for the body to relax at which point I would think about my posture and would try to slink into the seat in an even more loose and flexible manner. On the third breath I would say this is a chance to invite joy into your mind and

I would smile and create an internal wave of warm happy glow between my ears. With the fourth breath I would whisper be kind to yourself and on the fifth breath be kind to others and then I would repeat my breaths going from the first breath which of course I would remind myself is just a breath. I sometimes worried about the order of the fourth and fifth breaths and whether it was selfish to create a mantra that instructed me to be kind to myself before I am kind to others however I would defend myself now by referencing the guidance that flight attendants provide when they explain that in the event of an emergency those little plastic mouth pieces that flow with oxygen will fall from the ceiling and that it is important you should attach those to your own mouth first before you try to help others.

After a couple of cycles of this breathing I undoubtedly realised that I was barely keeping focus on my mantra anymore and rather kept returning instead to the girl from last night. Her form kept projecting onto the back of the chair in front of me. The way her hair moved and her clothes folded and when I tried to directly look at this remembered version of her in the eyes I could barely hold her gaze without snapping my head to look out the window and realising that for a minute there I had stopped breathing.

In order to further distract myself I take out from my bag the small aluminium bee automaton that Les had sent me. Les lived around three hours north of Newcastle so we rarely got to meet face to face but when we did it was nearly always up where Les lived on the dirt roads of his small dairy country town. He was not a fan of coming

into the city however he did once visit with me a new jazz club in Hamilton that by chance I would later take my future wife to. The small aluminium bee automaton he sent me which is how I describe it because that is how it was labelled on the box Les mailed it in is a five centimetre length of metal pressed into delicate overlapping petals that could unfurl into the wings of a bee by way of a little pneumatic canister beneath which would pull in air and spin a series of gears pleated in such a way that they would shake the wings of the bee and allow it to rise and fly a half metre into the air above its launch surface.

Les had once raised the idea of insects being able to teach the next generation of coders about machine learning patterns because in the same analogous way it was actually toy mechanical robot insects created in the eleventh century that later gave rise to the industrial revolution. He was always handy with building machines to help out on his property although his father in fair humour would always tell Les that he should be careful lest he one day build a machine that would do him and his whole family out of their livelihoods. Unfortunately that never came to pass. Les died when I was twenty three years old and in the vein of being kind to myself before being kind to others I am thankful that he was able to be best man on my wedding day. I know that is a very selfish thought and of no consolation to the bigger story that should have been his life. The first breath is just a breath but I find it harder to get to the second breath some days as I keep returning to the first.

The name of every butterfly in my stomach on that

train trip to Maitland still return to me in alphabetical order. I remember taking my notepad from my bag within which was the note that this girl who is now my wife had left with me the night before. This is the first time I have thought about this particular piece of synchronicity but it seems that this story I am telling you now begins in one way and then begins again in another way as a result of two paper notes being left on my stomach at two different instances eighteen years apart. This present inclination to describe how I ended up erupting in Shanbudia started after waking up on the plane and finding squares of paper on my stomach that a passenger had scribed a poem on about my eruption. And now this remembrance back to that train ride the night after I met the girl who would become my wife because she left a note on my stomach after I fell asleep beside her early that morning on the beach after having spent the night together. This was long before any of us had mobile phones or internet profiles to connect with so at this point all I had to go on in finding her again was a flourish of handwritten pencil curvature pressed to a note which read Maitland Station Six Pea Em Kiss Hug Kiss Hug.

The impact of the previous evening spent with this girl who as aforementioned left me in a state of absolute sensory debt cannot be overstated. That night changed everything about who I am in ways that I could not anticipate at the time and have even less idea about now. On one level it is simple to describe it concretely. It was first love. No doubt my understanding of what it would feel like to love someone and to be loved was profoundly

naive. I somewhat anticipated how two people could grow into each other but I had zero idea about how love would dissolve the high walls that cradled my sense of self. And so in that train carriage with the fluorescent tubes and the echoes of the prior evening phasing through my head I began to write the outline of a story that I would go on to plan and tinker with in a condition that eighteen years on still remains unfinished. I gave it the name of the first sentence I wrote in my pad which was A Complicated Surgery Will Take Place On The Beach Tonight.

I was not and never will be a novelist but what I am is perhaps more accurately an outliner. At first I used to create the outlines of stories as a tool to assist with my socialisation. I was not and never will be a natural conversationalist. Instead of trying to improvise small talk with colleagues or neighbours I would use prepared outlines of mostly fictional slash vaguely autobiographical stories. Quirky anecdotes from daily life that I would write down and add a few drops of surrealism to and then arrange for accessible retelling. Even today as much as I enjoy books I mostly prefer summaries of them rather than delving too far into the details. I believe you can often get a better sense of narrative and character and intention without having to be explicit about descriptions of rooms or word for word he said she said dialogues that try to synthetically mirror the experience of listening in on a conversation. Much rather give me a single point of information over there and another point of information way over there and let my mind grow long legs so as to generate a world between those two points.

On the free bus from the Newcastle Entertainment Stadium to Beaumont Street in Hamilton my wife who at the time was a medical intern wearing fox ears and a purple jumper with a wizard hood said her first complete sentence of the evening as we passed over a bridge that spanned a creek with a big sign beside that labeled it Styx Creek. Her voice ahem are we crossing from the underworld to the world of the living or is it the other way around. I laughed and in the process cracked open a frozen rock that had been forming between my ears since I first asked her out an hour earlier. Me ha well it is funny because the bus driver is named Charon. She laughed and said ok so you know Dante at least. Up till this exchange she said she had been a little worried about my conversational capacity given that we met at a Street Fighter arcade tournament. She poked me in the side and my heart became very warm and sent heat rising up to my head where the hard frozen rock was now completely decimated.

I said you know it is funny because Charon is the name of one of the moons that orbit Pluto. She said why is that funny. I said well it is funny because you have Charon as the biggest of the moons that orbit Pluto and then there is a book I read recently called The Rings of Saturn. It is a kind of walking book as in it is a description of a walking journey where the author sees things around him and relates them to historical events and philosophical concepts that fade into each other like a dream or perhaps more accurately like a sleepwalk between concepts and all the places he visits are coastal and grey and melancholy and

the hotels are old and lonely and I just love it. I want to write a book like that one day. Anyway I say the thing about The Rings of Saturn is it got me interested in other walking journey pieces of writing and I was looking around on the internet for similar stories and I came across a local guy who writes a blog each week about walks he takes right here in Hamilton. He walks with his dog down a drain slash creek each day and he examines the ecosystem of garbage and memory that fill it up when it is dry enough to walk down the middle of. I say guess what the name of the drain slash creek is.

At this her soft pink cheeks pivot to the window of the bus through the night sky outside. Suddenly she looks very serious and I immediately worry that I have said something wrong after feeling like I was doing so well with my words. She says do you know that in the time between discovering Pluto and then later taking away its planetary status it did not even manage to do one rotation of the earth. And then she says do you know what the rings of Saturn are made from. I think I know but I say I do not. Without looking away from the window she says the rings of Saturn are made of destroyed moons that were for thousands of years happily in orbit but then all of a sudden one after another of the moons became curious about the surface of the planet and they plummeted straight into its atmosphere. The daisy chain of moons shattered into tiny shards of ice that were then sucked into a cycling loop of eternal limbo around Saturn. She turns to me and says you know the petrol fueling this bus is made of dinosaurs that died fifty million years ago. Somewhere between the

statement in which she described the dissolution of moons into ice rings and dinosaurs becoming oil I decided that the way to win the heart of this girl before the end of the evening was to court beside her a very particular rhythm of danger and chaos. I was eighteen and sitting next to a redhead nurse with fox ears and a wizards hood as we passed over the River Styx in a bus bound for a suburb founded on jazz and a diasporic immigration of pubs and walking blogs. Put all of this beneath a hydraulic press and see if you can generate something other than libido. It is the only reasonable response.

From hadouken to here. I remember twenty years ago reading a single comic panel in the weekend newspaper. It showed a young lad sitting very close to a television while he played video games. Standing behind him in adoration were his parents. Thought bubbles containing imaginary job listings hovered above their proud expressions. Save the princess and slay the dragon. Eighty thousand dollars a year plus health insurance. Can you line up the coloured blocks and beat the clock. Seventy two thousand dollars plus car and meal allowance. The joke being how absurd it was to consider that playing video games could result in a real job. And yet here we are in an age where professional video gamers are offered million dollar contracts and sponsor entire lines of eSports apparel. Before all this became true however there existed low budget arcade game tournaments held from time to time inside rented warehouses and pavilions in regional centres across the country that would introduce and focus on major games of the time. The only one I was interested

in was Street Fighter II. It was at one of these tournaments that I met my future wife.

Honestly I am not sure why I resonated with Street Fighter so much but it was for a time an utter compulsion. Perhaps it was the holiday I took with my parents when I was ten or eleven to Forster when I discovered the game sitting in the corner of a fish and chip shop. The imported aesthetic from somewhere over the sea combined with the technical motion of the game fascinated me from that moment on through discrete periods of my life. Periods say when my need for abundant virtual fantasy imbued in conflict was significantly heightened. Only recently I have actually acquired an original Street Fighter arcade cabinet for my office. When I learned that an actual official Street Fighter tournament was going to be held in Newcastle back in two thousand and one it was an absolute revelation. My final exams for high school were wrapping up for the year and I caught a bus from where I lived at the time on Lake Macquarie to the Newcastle Entertainment Stadium. No joke by chance or not on the ride to the stadium I sat near a guy who was a bonafide Street Fighter champion. He had taken fifth place in a national event a couple of years earlier when they held the first Australian tournament in Sydney. His advice to me was to listen to the move your opponent is preparing to make before you see it happen on the screen. Listen to the half rotation of the joystick and the predicted press of a button and calculate your reaction before anything occurs in visible reality. That is the way to victory.

I followed that advice for all of three seconds

before I started getting pulverised like those moons of Saturn. Button mashing was my only survival strategy now and it was while I was pounding kick and punch buttons that I looked away from the monitor for a second and saw standing on the side of the room by the first aid station a girl with red hair who was looking extremely bored. When I say she was looking extremely bored I should add that she was also looking like an embodiment of everything I never knew that I loved until I soaked up this snapshot of her and developed it in the same way I imagine our universe commenced and unfurled from pre-nature to bang in less time than it took for me to look back to Street Fighter where the battle was already lost. The only question after this moment was how I could go on living with the knowledge that this girl existed.

When I mentioned earlier that I knew the name of every butterfly that was in my stomach as I took the train the following evening to see her again can I just make explicit here that this naming of butterflies could in no way compare with the megaton of them that ricocheted inside of me as I walked over to that first aid table. Each of the several thousand butterflies that had just emerged from cocoons that lined my insides after a lifetime of hibernation decided that they should each pick up a colourful plastic horn and toot them at maximum volume behind the walls of my gut. Imagine say out of each horn a cascade of water splashed against an array of neon lights hanging from the ceiling of my liver and the balustrades of my kidneys which caused my insides to spark dangerously in a potentially fatal fireworks display of glitching elec-

tricity that honestly did not even account for one percent of the nervous energy I was feeling as I made it all the way to the first aid table to say hi. I said hi and then blank. Everything up to that moment I remember so clearly and then void. The next few minutes are missing footage. Perhaps my head was doing everything possible to navigate the situation and the only way it could manage to function was to shut down all other sense data. Truthfully I have some years of my life that feel as if they were a product of that same fidelity.

Of course I can surmise what I would have said to the girl with the red hair. I would have tried to look as stimulating and human as possible and said hey this is likely not at all what you came here for but. You look like someone I would very much like to take out for a nice meal and a dance etcetera etcetera. Do you live around here because there is a bus that heads down to Beaumont Street and we can grab a bite at The Watt and then head to a cool jazz club down the street and so on and so on. And then what do you know. Twenty minutes after whatever version of this conversation took place and we are on the bus together bumping over Styx Creek and talking about Dante and the destruction of moons and dinosaurs. I could be extremely lame here and say that I ended the day with a higher score than I anticipated from the video game tournament but why sully the moment.

My first game console was an Atari. The characters on screen were often no more than single blocks that shuffled around a brutally minimalist screen of other blocks painted with a palette of two or three colours per

game. But within those simple graphical conditions I could see entire new worlds. Video games combined my favourite childhood entertainments. Most every game was a Choose Your Own Adventure storybook of fantasy art with a soundtrack that fused classical music and early electronica into a form that with regards to the music I would later myself go on to compose and emulate for what became one of my first paid jobs.

I have thought a great deal about what swooned me in those early days of playing video games. In light of recent shooting tragedies around the world conducted by young people steeped in online video game culture I have come to be concerned with how many games have exclusively turned into ultraviolent simulations of death. This coming from someone who enjoyed and still does enjoy a video game focused entirely on fighting in the streets. If every song is a love song then every story is a ghost story of survival in the face of the void. Video games have become remarkably adept at telling this story. Thinking back through the history of games like chess and chequers it is clear just how much of a role these structures had in simulating narratives of warfare.

For a time games took on increasingly moralistic dimensions in an attempt to teach spirituality to young people through early iterations of board games like snakes and ladders. Climb to heaven or fall via the snake. Spirituality was later replaced by civic responsibility and then capitalism in further board games like The Mansion of Happiness and Game Of The District Messenger Boy and of course Monopoly and all the rest. Like how water

always finds the most direct passage downwards it did not take long before game designers found out how to teach these lessons of civics and capitalism by accessing the very bottom of the brain stem and visualising ever more immersive ways of killing each other.

I have been thinking lately about creating a not for profit think tank organisation of sorts that focuses on creating games to help solve local and global problems using an online crowdsourcing hackathon format. A couple of years ago I learned about a medical research game that had been designed in just this way. It allowed players with absolutely no medical or science experience to play an online game that involved the folding of proteins. The game play was an origami styled puzzle in which you tried different variations of folding until you found the most efficient way of bending a randomly generated protein. The results that came about from the thousands of players online who contributed their time and uniquely human problem solving capacities to this task allowed researchers to contribute these solutions to computer algorithms which could then learn to solve similar medical problems in human ways that it was not previously familiar with. This is what I would like to see hundreds of millions of young people contributing to each night in their bedrooms. That or going outside for an unarmed walk occasionally.

The notion of entertainment is something that resonates significantly with me at present on an increasingly moral level. Certainly too it comprises most of my professional life. I mentioned earlier that the reason I was working in Shanbudia was with a focus on showing

government officials and psychologists and educators how children might be able to play in the quote unquote cities of the future. It is tricky to trace exactly how I ended up in a role where I examine so closely the design of how young people play in their surroundings. My first job seemed to set me up on an entirely different trajectory.

When I was twelve a small church employed me in a suburb not far from where I grew up. I was the pipe organist there for occasional weekend weddings. My parents used to have a little electronic keyboard with letters stuck to the keys that they bought when they were first married as a shared pastime project. Neither progressed very far with it but when I was around four or five I started to play with it and learned rather quickly. Such I guess is the supple responsiveness of the young brain. My parents had many of those early music notation books with the big capital letters inside bubbles to follow along with and play popular songs of the early to mid twentieth century. Years later when I was in university I used to play the organ at a local nursing home that my grandfather was in at the time. When I would play a song like Bye Bye Blackbird the elderly residents in the nursing home would sing along because of course they all shared the same songbook as part of their collective consciousness. I wonder what the nursing homes of the future will look like in this respect. Perhaps we will be sitting around with virtual reality headsets on reliving the days of our youth rather than singing songs together. What songs would we all know. Wonderwall perhaps.

When I would play the organ for a wedding the

most important two songs were the Bridal Chorus by Wagner as the bride arrived at the church and walked down the aisle and then the Wedding March by Mendelssohn as the bride and groom ran out of the church and into a waiting getaway car. Between these two songs I had a good thirty minutes with nothing to do and so I would sit and read through some of the old dusty hymn books scattered around the raised balcony area at the back of the church where the organ was housed.

Sometimes I would take a video game magazine to read as well. This led to my second opportunity of paid employment. One day during a particularly long period of waiting for my cue to play the closing song I had been browsing through a magazine and came across an advertisement for a competition to write a song for a new pinball machine being released in arcades over in Japan that Summer. The theme of the machine was a car chase racing game with concept art showing a beautiful gradient of yellow and purple beachside scenery with a shadowed geometry of tessellating rectangular buildings in the background. I guess that it may have been set in Okinawa but at the time it was just a magically exotic scene that swirled with so many images I already had in my head from early video games depicting pixelated Japanese sunset beach scenes.

I took one of the hymn books and with a pencil I wrote out a half remembered melody from the background music of a Street Fighter stage I had been playing recently and intertwined the melody with the chords and harmonies of a Bach hymn. With a bit of further tinkering I wrote a

tune out on notation paper and mailed it off the following week to the magazine. Two months later I received a response saying my song had been accepted and not only that but the company who produced the pinball machine would like to commission two more songs from me for sequel pinball machines. You can imagine how quickly I told my friends at school about this opportunity. The company instructed me to write out additional melodies as well for when special events took place within the game like wizard mode or bonus rounds when all the lights would sparkle and the music would shift gear into a frantic tutti of energy. I mailed off these tracks and received very generous payment back and then I never heard from or had any communication with the company again. Perhaps they went out of business. In recent years I have looked around the internet for any sign of the pinball machines as I never actually got to hear my melodies come to life on them. I did find a scanned photo of one of the pinball machines being advertised in a Learn To Speak English book from Japan that a friend showed me once but that is all I have been able to secure as any sort of concrete proof that any of this actually happened.

Music has remained one of my most sincere passions in life. A couple of months ago whilst taking one of our evening walks to collect street miscellany to examine under our microscope I told my wife my intention of scoping out plans for an opera. I thought I could potentially turn my Beach Surgery narrative into an operatic production with an array of experimental instrumentation supporting the action on stage. As an

example instead of singing I wondered if perhaps each time the performers opened their mouths we heard live sounds recorded from satellites passing the earth instead of vocal utterances. I asked my wife if she would design a set for the production.

She is an artist of phenomenal talent. Whereas I have always been an amateur tinkering with different creative mediums in whatever improvised manner I could best muster she rather possesses a genuine and pure light bulb of skill that glows from inside of her. That is not to say she has not pushed herself to the limit in terms of training and practice over the years. Of course she has. But whereas I feel like the artistic workshop in my head is a broken mound of splinters stirring dust in a spirit of destruction and collapse it always feels to me like the workshop in her head is a beautifully polished space with clear natural lighting and many clean surface areas to unfold designs and works in progress. She would argue this is not the case at all and that both our workshops are one and the same.

From when she was very young she loved to draw. She grew up amongst bushland just north of the Hunter in the opposite direction out of Newcastle to where Les lived. As a small piece of trivia she actually grew up on the same block as an elderly Nobel prize winning novelist. Like my wife this novelist made a habit of disappearing into the density of dry green and brown at the end of their street with the intention of soaking up the solitude cast by the ghost gums and the paper barks and not least the immense telecommunication wires that ran through the fire trails

which would buzz with such precise flux at times that you could actually make out the words of the phone calls being transmitted across the lines. Some critics propose that many of the best lines the novelist ever wrote came from overheard disjecta cast out from those wires. For example one of his passages about how there is no such thing as the sky as it is no different from the invisible and perpetually ignored air right in front of our faces so either everything is sky or there is no sky and then he makes commentary on how when he mentioned this to his parents he was sent out to the yard to spend the rest of the day begging the sky for forgiveness. This is commonly assumed to have been sourced from a conversation that shimmered down from the telecommunication wires as it was composed during a period of his writing career that contained a number of other thematically similar overheard remembrances that directly reference the space above our heads. It is likely my wife and this novelist never crossed paths in the bushland as he was of quite a considerable age and reportedly in poor physical health around the time when my wife started to wander between the trees with her sketchbook and charcoal in hand.

Solitude has always been very important to my wife as much as it has been to me. In some ways it is a miracle we ever met each other given how much we value being alone. To be solitary is to think and to create but it is also a regenerative tool. My wife once told me a story about a time she was alone in the bush with her sketchbook and charcoal and when I say she told me the story once I am being quite literal as she has only ever mentioned it the

one time and when I made reference to it some years later she experienced an involuntary physical reaction that told me she had no intention of ever talking about it again. The story which I will share here for now but may be removed later if my wife requests for it to be taken out is that she was walking along a rusty rail line from the previous century which must have been used to transport coal through the bush back when that industry was literally shaping the area. She looked up for a reason she could not account for and saw in front of her perched on the rail line a bird of a variety that she had never before seen. The bird looked directly at my wife and made a noise that she had never before heard from a bird or any other animal or part of nature or machine for that matter. She stared at the bird wondering if she should open her sketchbook and draw it or whether this would frighten the bird away. As it turns out she had already begun to do exactly this and immediately the bird flew up above the trees and was never to be seen or heard by her again.

When I asked my wife to describe the bird to me her face instantly turned to shadow. She went to efforts to explain just how intrinsically linked the sound was that the bird made to the appearance of the bird and that any accurate description of the bird must simultaneously share the phenomena of both its visual and audible elements. However the more she described the physical appearance of the bird the less she was able to recall how the bird sounded. And when she would start to recall the sound the bird made she would lose sight of what the bird looked like and further to this the details would corrupt and change so

that a sound she was almost completely sure of when she was focused on describing what she heard of the bird would in a few seconds change into something entirely different when she attempted to then get into the details of what the bird looked like. She eventually became so exasperated at trying to recall the bird to me that she jumped up from the bed and left the room in such a rush of emotion as I had never witnessed from her before. I only tried to bring the subject up again once after this and then I realised I should probably never raise it again but there have been times when I have seen the way she turns towards the resounding of a sudden trumpet or horn as are sometimes practiced in a hall a couple of streets over from our house or even the way she looks at a particular arrangement of branches in a tree from time to time when I know she must still think about the bird she saw and heard that day on the rail in the bushland. I am sure she must hope it will one day manifest itself in front of her again. In saying this she has not been back to that bushland for over twenty years so perhaps she is not so preoccupied with finding the bird as I assume.

Before meeting my wife I had not really dated before. A couple of aimless nights here and there of course but never anything significant. The last time was a double date with Les although the girls would never admit it was a date but rather it was just an exploratory night of misadventure. I can still see the way Les smoked out the back of a service station on some empty industrial drive in his black trench coat in a shadow beside lamplight at arms length of one of the girls who wore a white sundress

directly beneath the lamp and how she coughed and how they looked like chess pieces on opposing sides of a board. Sure she spluttered and cursed at him but she and her friend also laughed until their cheeks turned red and it was a good night with moments that I am sure all four of us will never forget or admit to again although or perhaps because of this we never did go out with those girls again.

The bus pulls up on Beaumont Street right outside The Watt. This is not only one of the most historic pubs in the area but also for sure one of the most unpredictable establishments in the city. It is still to this day the only place I have ever witnessed homemade outdoor fireworks released indoors and when you ordered a steak you never quite knew if the chef was going to remember you asked for it medium rare or whether the chef was going to be tackled to the floor of the kitchen by police on an almost nightly raid of the establishment. The Watt was the first place I ever saw drugs being visibly handled and the first place I ever saw a fist fight between adults break out. Once I was walking past and a young professional looking chap in his early twenties walked out the front doors of The Watt and all of a sudden a red sedan careened down the middle of the street and slammed the breaks on beside this young chap and then whoever was in the passenger seat pulled out a rifle and pointed it right in his face. The young chap reached into his suit pocket and pulled out a huge bundle of hundred dollar notes as in there must have been around five or ten thousand dollars there and he threw it in the window of the sedan and then it sped off down the street. It was that kind of pub.

But it was also the kind of pub that had the best bands and a really interesting mix of people from the arts students who walk down from Islington who I can see tonight such as these couple of poet dudes with their long hair and thin arms wrapped around their noise musician girlfriends with piercings all over and an absence of any underwear and then you have the big guys in from the wharf who have docked at the Carrington coal loader and they might be just in from Singapore or from China and they are of every nationality you can think of with tattoos on their forearms and their thighs and faces that to my eyes always demand to be read in combination of each other like hieroglyphics on a wall but because the sailors keep moving around they tell a story without a definite beginning or conclusion and because of this the content contained within their ink tells something utterly true about the narrative data running beneath the skin of the world and then on past these sailors you have the taxi drivers hanging around the front doors smoking and waiting for their next shift to start and while they were very rarely involved in fist fights I have seen more than a couple of them throw a glass into the pub like a hand grenade that started many of the worst brawls that they would then stand and laugh about from the sidelines and of course it would be remiss to not mention the peculiar family friendly vibe injected by a few of the patrons as you have locals in pressed suits and married couples in groups wearing organic shirts and pants abiding that tightrope aesthetic of free thinking progressives and the mortgages they churn butter for every week day and just to wrap up

the scene I would also make mention of the university students in polo shirts and thongs playing complicated board games near the music stage and the electronic slash country slash dub reggae fusion band setting up near them and the bar staff who are absolute athletes in the manner they are able to move around the bar and dive between each others legs in order to get past with a glass of bourbon and a packet of nuts and not to say anything here about the long term residents who live above the bar area who are a whole story all of themselves and while I have only been eighteen for a few months and hence have only been coming to places like this for a short while I can honestly say that sure of course absolutely it is true I have only just met this girl and am only just starting to get a read on her but I can think of no other place in the world that will make more of an impression of the kind I am trying to make in terms of a heightened sense of stimulation and fascination and why not once more call it what it is which is a certain sense of danger that can only be forged here at the Watt Hotel.

It is one thing to be able to entertain yourself. I have invested a major portion of my life into recognising how I am best entertained and how to replicate this whenever the conditions are suitable. To commence the best sequence of lights and colours and sounds and gradients of tactile feedback that stimulate just the right sort of emotional stew to fizzle and reflect up against all the interior surfaces of my skull. Like I have mentioned before this reflection is important because for something to exist it must have a mirror double. To remember that you

have a world outside of your head you must find a way to mirror it from the inside. For me this is what guides me when I sit across from a beautiful redhead nurse in training with green space flower eyes and cosplay fox ears after we order some pork belly bites and fries and whatever else we could afford on a salary of historic pinball compositions and first aid internship money. We had a beer each and clinked bottles together in cheers as I unleashed all the lights and colours and sounds and gradients of tactile feedback that I could infuse into my words as I attempted to show this beautiful girl just what a rich interior life I had and what a carnival of ideas I could blast confetti style all over the dinner table. What else could I do. Play it cool and ask her questions about her life. I only learned to do that a couple of months ago.

For the most part I think this was not a horrible dining experience. I remember that she laughed and played with her hair and looked at me with wide eyes and I remember writing in my notebook on the train the following day how there was a moment when she leaned back and kept her eyes trained on mine as she stretched her arms above her head and smiled in what was the first sign since she accepted my invitation to go out for dinner and a dance that this all might potentially lead somewhere. While I remember with extreme bias in personal favour of my conversational performance that night if say I was to watch closed circuit security footage of how things actually were I would not be at all surprised if the camera showed a nervous and fidgety young guy who could not stop leaning on the table and could not make proper eye

contact with the beautiful girl in front of him as he stumbled through half remembered anecdotes and unnecessary punchlines with frequently and awkwardly performed laughs at the start and end of each sentence as he took perpetual sips of the beer in order to give himself a brief rest before diving into another downward spiral of social annihilation. Yet somehow through all of this I am confident that the camera would still show that the beautiful girl across from me actually did laugh and did play with her hair and did look at me with wide eyes as she stretched and smiled and took me by the hand and gave me mercy by asking if I wanted to dance. Of course. Anything to get me out of my head.

For all its communal variance The Watt was actually no larger than a postage stamp and hence there was not nearly enough room to dance next to the university students in polo shirts and thongs playing complicated board games near the music stage with the electronic slash country slash dub reggae fusion band jamming out an immense wall of static. Add to this that a dozen sailors and taxi drivers had already formed a circle around the two of us and were closing in with the intention of separating my now wife then girl who I had only just started to halfway impress by cutting me off and shoving me into the bathrooms while they breathed down the neck of this redhead with fire in her step as she squeezed tight my hand and whipped us through the enclave of tattoo meat and from that moment forward to today she has never let go of my hand as we exited The Watt and I told her about this terrific jazz club down the street and honestly it sounds

like the sort of two dimensional fantasy I might write in a fictionalised remembrance of times past but she really did then lean into me and say lead the way. And oh how the fragrance of candy banana and rose water from her hair did enter my head and change forever the lights and colours and sounds and gradients of tactile feedback by adding the scent of a woman who I would go on to love forever as one of the great electrical responses that would give me real cause to enjoy this act of existence. Praise be to walking away from the dangers of a volatile pub in momentum of cool jazz and the warm body of a hand held tight atop the Beaumont Street pavement on some enchanted Summer evening. Oh praise be to love.

As it turns out the jazz club was near empty. There were less people in the club than there were on the carriage I took to Maitland the following evening. Two or three at most not including us and not including the robot who welcomes you at the door. Remember this is two thousand and one so to have a robot anything is a novelty. This is the reason Les and I came here a couple of weeks earlier. The robot is well dressed and has a letterbox head and illuminated red plastic piping for its lips. Its long arms are made of aluminium tubing and as it greets us the redhead in the fox ears looks at me as if to say what the hell is this place. A cassette hissed voice emits from the mouth of the robot. It says Welcome to the Dampened Cardboard.

Now here is the thing. When Les and I were here a few weeks earlier this place was popping with energy. The room had been a cacophony of dancing and laughter which combined with the novelty of the place made it somewhere

I just had to bring this girl tonight. And it is the novelty which I have not even mentioned yet. It is not the robot greeter but rather the jazz band inside that is worth the price of admission as wait for it the band is composed entirely from sheets of cardboard. This is completely true. On the stage were positioned a half dozen arrangements of corrugated cardboard shaped into instruments like a big cardboard trumpet and a big cardboard drum kit and a big cardboard double bass and so on. Inside the cardboard instruments were pneumatic pumps that sent barrels of wind coursing through to either produce an incredibly realistic trumpet resonance or to send the drum sticks into action against the hollow bass drums or the snare drums filled with rice. The double bass had whipper snipper cord strung down its front and a pair of tweezers held by a cardboard arm that would pluck in time. But here is the kicker. To make the band activate you had to move around on the dance floor. It was a bit like an old pump organ in which you are required to keep pushing the pedals as you play to blow air throughout the bellows. When Les and I arrived a few weeks ago the dance floor was full of people and the band was literally in full swing. I worried that the cardboard might rip except that staff at the club kept sprinkling the instruments with beer to keep them loose enough to play all night. The dance floor tonight however was completely empty and so the band was still and silent. My future wife now an increasingly skeptical observer looking at me as if to say what gives. Why would you bring me somewhere like this. I took her by the hand and said here let me show you. We walked onto the dance floor

and a sad trumpet note wheezed out of the cardboard on stage. I did a little dance on the spot and the drum hit one of its snares filled with rice. It sounded like somebody behind the bar had dropped a box of napkins. As this redhead with the fox ears walked towards me so lightly that the double bass did not even receive enough haptic feedback to pluck its own string she spoke to me in a voice so soft that if the club had not been empty I would never have heard it. She smiled and said how far is it to the beach from here. We walked out and perhaps it was just the wind from outside passing through the open door of the club but I am sure the instruments played a closing chord as we skipped out down the street.

The beach is only a five minute walk down Parkway Avenue where coal ships the size of watch batteries float for decades on the line between sea and sky. Before we land on the beach I remember we both eased down a concrete slope near the sand which leads to the public baths. All these years on I can still see in my mind a single pear shaped globe that hung from a wire above the pool and illuminated the white concrete perimeter of the area. Six numbered diving blocks were stationed at one end with long spectator steps that curved around the other end of the pool. For a moment I wonder if I can hear the sailors on the horizontal coal ships but then I feel this redhead with the fox ears pull on my arm and point towards an astronaut seated on a wooden bench in front of the baths. Another figure wearing a black robe walks from the change rooms towards the astronaut and they are dragging a rope behind them with objects attached that

clang along the ground like pieces of loose metal. As our eyes adjust to the scene we realise that the figure is pulling a string of alarm clocks up to the edge of the pool. And then I realise that I have seen this before. I tell my future wife that this astronaut has not yet been into space. They must be a new recruit ready for a pending mission. The figure in robes lays down the rope with its alarm clocks tied on as they lower themselves into the water. They wade towards the middle of the pool and stand beneath the pear shaped globe with a hand out beckoning the astronaut to enter the water. The astronaut slowly rises from the bench and takes long steps into the water before paddling out to where the figure with floating robes leans into the astronaut with a hand on the visor of their bulbous white helmet and says something that I cannot decipher and something that I have never thought to ask my wife about as to whether she was able to hear what was said. Perhaps I will ask her after I finish writing this recount and update the previous sentence if necessary. The robed figure keeps his hand pressed against the helmet and then he pushes forward hard as the astronaut falls backwards and sinks beneath the surface. Now the rope with the alarm clocks are swiftly pulled into the water. A sound rises from the pool like the music of whales calling to each other in some ambient pulsating cry. It is the alarm clocks. They are ringing from the bottom of the pool. The astronaut stays down with the clocks while the choral tones keep on and then fade. As the robed figure reaches a hand into the water and helps the astronaut to resurface I tell this redhead with the tears in her eyes that the baptism is now

complete. The astronaut can now go into space.

We have been married ten years now and we are expecting our first baby in less than a month. Not that we did not try to make a family from the very start but sometimes these things take time. Sometimes you first need to meet across a first aid table at a video game tournament and cross the River Styx while confirming that petrol is made out of dinosaurs before heading to the most dangerous pub in town and then standing together quietly in front of corrugated cardboard instruments trying to get a bit of air and then onto the baths where the newest astronaut recruit is baptised with alarm clocks and suddenly what do you know eight years pass and you live together in a two bedroom house down the street from where you first met and you get married a couple of hours away in the desert. Then you work each day and create a garden together and learn the name of one neighbour and then the next and meanwhile your parents come and go and one day you get a mobile phone and a dog and cut some branches from the biggest tree in the yard which to be completely transparent it was this tree that was the reason for buying the house in the first place and then some portion of a decade later the alarm clocks start ringing in the wife of your belly and she says guess who is going to be a daddy.

That night eighteen years ago when we embraced on the beach together and I pushed my face into her breasts and listened to the chambers of her heart move a couple of dozen litres of blood around her body and she pushed her left ear against the top of my head to hear all the tiny

mechanical gears spin into each other and generate just enough friction to cause the sort of warmth that gives birth to consciousness. I could not have anticipated the life to come from that moment. Earlier in the night on the bus when she asked if we were passing from the underworld to the world of the living or the other way around I now know that the answer was yes. It was both of these things and would be for every single day we lived our lives together.

Afterwards when she was lying in my arms on the declivity of a sand dune that cradled several other sand dunes in a fold of shadows that flattened out to the shoreline with her red hair strewn across my chest she looked into the sky and asked if I could hear that. I said I could hear the ocean and she said not the ocean. Can you hear the sound of the earth rubbing against space. Look up towards the curved roof of the world and listen. She said that is the Kármán line. The layer of atmosphere that is technically the last piece of our earthly sky before it transitions to outer space. She said you can hear the curvature of atmosphere pressing against the pressure of all surrounding space anytime you are surrounded by environmental silence. Can you hear that low droning tone. I said I could not. She pressed herself further into me and said that sometimes the sound causes her to feel nauseous. I meant to ask her how she knew so much about space but it turned out to be another one of those things I assumed I would ask a little later on and then never got around to.

Sometime after sunrise I woke to the sound of seagulls overheard and joggers calling out to each other

from behind the dunes. I felt a pressure on my stomach. It was a flat stone holding down a torn page from a pocket calendar. On the page was the handwritten note I mentioned at the start of this remembrance. Maitland Station Six Pea Em Kiss Hug Kiss Hug. It had been some years since I had caught the train to Maitland. When I went to visit Les I caught two buses north. I thought back over the events of the previous night and could not believe what had happened. The idea of seeing her again obviously thrilled me but it also made me nervous. I was struck by a sudden drop in confidence. Pulling off a night like the one just gone was one thing but how to perform a successful repeat performance. What was it about me that she liked. Who am I. I know who she is. She is a trainee nurse with red hair who can hear the sound of the earth rubbing against space. I started to fantasise about all that I knew about her combined with all that I did not. Imagine the adventures. What if she was a samurai nurse wielding a sword who found me all beaten up and bruised in the city. She says to me that we need to get to the beach by sundown for a complicated surgery that is going to take place. What if I am a damaged and beaten up truck of a guy. A boxer punchdrunk and swaying around the city and now twitching on the mat and thinking about pinball melodies. Who knows. Whatever the case my head was a dream theatre full of evolving stories about how to live and I could not wait to get on the train that evening to pen it all down. I went home and showered and slept through lunch and then got dressed and packed my messenger bag and caught a bus to Newcastle Station.

Leif and Katita. Not my name and not hers and yet these were the two I settled on. I had used Leif as a name many times in my writing in the past as an anagram of Life. Katita was a new one though and I can only assume at the time I was thinking about the fox ears that my wife was wearing the night before and how I must have moved from canine to feline as she certainly shared many more personality traits what with her watermelon eyes and so on which must have been how I synthesised the name Katita for my female protagonist. Looking out at the towns I passed from the inside of the train carriage on by Hexham and Tarro and Beresfield and the way the city of Newcastle gave way to the pastures and dusty platforms of these little country towns that would become more rural with every passing stop. It is not quite accurate to say that the electric lights of the city were gradually replaced with the oil lamps and candle flames of the countryside but it certainly could be said that the full moon over Maitland was being turned up in incremental clicks of brightness and clarity that rendered it as a much more tactile piece of concrete space than I had ever been exposed to and it reminded me how in those twenty four hours since first meeting the girl who would go on to become my wife and during the twelve hours since I had last seen her I was driven as if by an invisible force to reach out and touch things with my hands in such a way that my fingers were honestly just craving any smooth line or torn ridge of the world to caress and feel and remember whether this was on earth or as was not immediately apparent to also crave the surface of anything outside the earth as well.

I have since my youth been a dedicated planner of stories although I very rarely follow through beyond the notes. It seems to me that a story can be quite suitably told through outline alone without all the minutiae filled in. You get a sense of narrative and character and meaning in ways that are most always a stronger representation of what you intended to communicate without having to go down into all the he said she said and then this happened rigmarole of storytelling. In saying that I just had a look at my notes for this Beach Surgery story and I must have laid well over three hundred thousand words down so far. Some notes go deep into the bones of a scene whilst some are vague trajectories that cover great swathes of time in just a few words. If it is not already clear it should be said that Beach Surgery has been a consistent part of my body during these past eighteen years from the day after I met the medical intern who would become my wife through to my eruption the other week in Shanbudia. I would tinker with the project during break periods at work or on long drives or whilst walking my dog through the drains of my neighbourhood. However since my recent actions I will no longer be working on this story. Never again. Other than the political reasons that have recently struck at the very heart of my morality I am also artistically throwing my hands in the air as there is a glitch in the story that I do not have the resources to resolve. Blame the nausea of my geometry.

Beach Surgery is in two halves. The first half of the story takes place in the city of Newcastle while the second half of the story takes place a couple of hours inland in more rural aspects of the state. I have never been able to work out how the second half of the novel should connect with the first nor by consequence how the first half of the novel could speak to its concluding second half. The link does not compute. You will see what I mean when I describe the entire outline of the story from start to finish which depending on your level of commitment to sharing this dialogue with me is what I now intend to do.

Sitting at my desk here I have found the earliest and most preliminary handwritten ideas I made on the train those eighteen years ago before the first actual root of a sentence was planted. For what it is worth my handwriting shared then as it does now more in common with a Richter scale measuring tremors in the earth so it is a small miracle I am able to decipher anything of what I scratched out that evening beneath the scuffed fluorescents in the carriage. I am not positive where the phrase *A Complicated Surgery Will Take Place On The Beach Tonight* originated but in the margins near where I wrote this I noted the following. A man wakes up in a wheelchair being pushed by a woman wearing clothing that looks somewhere between a nurses uniform and a sword wielding assassin. She says that she works for the hospital and is responsible for getting the man to the beach for a complicated surgery by no later than half seven that evening. Beneath this I wrote what my intentions were for the story which are very embarrassing to read now but will at least convey something of how I

felt at that moment while I was decompressing the past twenty four hours. I wrote that this story should be like a pop song that I want to listen to on repeat. It should be about traveling through a dangerous city with someone you have just met and want to protect and fall in love with. The pace should be pulse racing like a sporting event in some midnight stadium with the lights cast onto teeming thousands who have come to partake in a spectacle. It should sound like bizarro free association jazz and conjure the visual aesthetic of a hand drawn nineteen twenties cartoon dreaming of what the future could be.

The rest of my notes in this first notebook were almost entirely structural. There are around fifteen other notebooks just like this one before I started to type almost exclusively on computer. Unfortunately many of the computer notes have been lost on broken harddrives and discarded compact disks over the years whereas I have always kept my physical notebooks safe. When cloud storage came into prominence a half decade ago I started to save notes up there fortunately so I do still have a huge swathe of text that I can search through from which I will pull many of the key story elements to share here. Perhaps the most important structural note to start with is to describe how I framed the passing of time. The whole story takes place across a two day period. This period is divided into two neat halves of one day each. Each half contains three chapters and each chapter contains four scenes. If I am being completely transparent I should say that each scene contains five micro scenes but I will not be describing the novel with that level of detail or we will be

here all year. The first half of the story spans from half ten at night through to half seven the following evening and the second half of the story spans from half seven in the morning through to half four the following morning. Within the first half we can see a division of time with Chapter One lasting from half ten at night through to half five in the morning followed by Chapter Two going from half five in the morning through to half twelve midday and then Chapter Three following from half twelve midday through to half seven in the evening. We then skip twelve hours and commence the second half of the story with Chapter Four at half seven in the morning taking us through to half two in the afternoon followed by Chapter Five from half two in the afternoon through to half nine in the evening and finally Chapter Six lasting from half nine in the evening through to half four in the morning. Believe it or not all of this matters a great deal to me.

A final structural note before I start describing the story. One of the two key protagonists is Leif who is a military engineer in a state of physical damage and memory loss. Leif has three significant temporary physical injuries at the start of the novel. He cannot walk and he cannot see and his heart is all out of whack. So there are three injuries and three chapters per half of the story. I will not elaborate further but just know that this is important to the overall trajectory of the narrative. Having mentioned that Leif is a military engineer I am not sure how many more biographical details about both characters I should go into. Understand this consideration is not because I am trying to create a sense of tension or mystery as I unroll the

story. This is critical. It is not my intention to tell this tale here in a manner that will excite you or create a sense of emotional engagement. Those are precisely the reasons I am not ethically able to continue writing it. What I am doing here is simply giving air to a wound. I feel so conflicted about what I am about to share with you and yet it is for this reason that I must lay it out on the surgical table. If every story is a ghost story of survival in the face of the void then this story faced the void the other night in Shanbudia and now the void is forever staring into me. Hopefully I have pulled myself out of Leif and my wife out of Katita in such a way that I can tell new stories about us in the future with our pending child in a newly forged world that emerges out of this one like an egg giving birth to another egg.

Okay. Chapter One.

A Complicated Surgery Will Take Place On The Beach Tonight opens on two protagonists standing on the rooftop of Bolton Street car park in the middle of Newcastle in the middle of the night. This is one of the highest positions in the city. I used to take my dog up there all the time and let him off the lead to run around and smell the scents rising from the restaurants below while I would stand and look out across the rooftops towards the harbour and watch coal ships come and go. It has always been a special place to me because I chanced upon it on one of my aimless wandering days. As large as the building is I had never realised its existence before and I am not confident that anyone else knows about it as I never seen any cars parked on any of its twelve storeys.

Even though Newcastle is a small city there are a surprising number of these locations that barely seem to exist. This was demonstrated to me again a couple of months ago when I was going for a walk around here with my father. He grew up in the area and attended a primary school that by chance stands right beside Bolton Street car park. The single brick school building that contained all the classrooms is still in position but I believe the playground was located where the car park now is. When my father and I went for a walk down Bolton Street we came across a little old cottage tucked behind a new office building and another car park that we only partially glimpsed from the street. We passed through the office car park to get a closer look and found the cottage to be a peculiar little colonial era brick building painted white and red with a hand scribed wooden sign hanging from its front that reads Rose House. My father could not recollect ever having seen the house in his youth despite having walked along this street many thousands of times. He supposed that another building must have hidden it from view much like this new office building and car park were doing now.

I did a little research on the cottage when I got home that day and read that it is quite possibly the oldest building in Newcastle with a heritage website listing it as having been built during the convict days of circa eighteen twenty to eighteen forty when the city was transitioning from penal outpost to free town. Another website questioned whether the present day building was actually built in this early time and proposed that rather it was a more recent rebuild. Either way it is quite a stunning

cottage and another example of the curious ontological incompleteness of Newcastle. When you look at the city from certain angles it has broad pieces of infrastructure missing and then when you step forward and see the buildings you were sure did not exist you realise that behind you the landscape has already folded up and disappeared. I imagine my father as a young man sitting near a classroom window and looking out in a state of daydream for many hours in the direction of this historic cottage without ever actually seeing it.

When my father used to live in this part of town as a young man he said that far from it being the gentrified beachside community it is now the dominant visual of the era was rather plumbs of thick black smog that would rise from a local coal power station and then fall onto the washing lines of neighbouring residents including his own which his mother would fiercely battle against in an effort to beat back the coal dust and keep it off the clothes. I remember another story my father told me from the days of his youth when he and a mate would run around the streets here and try to get a drink of lemonade at no charge from the local pubs and hotels in the area. My father said that there was a pub on an adjoining street to Bolton that used to employ performers from a traveling circus who would pass up and down the coast and at times during a stay over in Newcastle the strong man and bearded lady and clowns out of character and tightrope walkers without tightropes would serve in the restaurant and yes even pass a lemonade on the house to my father and his mate who would sit at the bar at eleven years of age and laugh to

themselves before running on down the street past the unseeable Rose Cottage through the soot from the power station across the rail lines where he would work as a station hand some years later and then after work onto the finish line of the city. That is to say onto the beach.

Back on the top of Bolton Street car park Katita looks ready for war as she wears a flak jacket covered in red desert sand. But then she is also wearing thigh high socks and yes those are kitten heels all shiny and red and highly reflective beside the samurai sword she handles in the moonlight. Red is a theme here. Her red hair and the cross on her first aid kit and the sand on her body and it could just be dry tears having mixed with the dirt on her face but it would not be out of the question to say there has been a film of deep red blood wiped across it not long ago. I wish I could find a photo of my wife in those early days. Until a couple of years ago I had a photo in my desk of her that I sent to Kim Jung Gi who was and remains one of my favourite illustrators. By chance at the time he opened up a rare commission opportunity which I pounced at. He drew my wife as Katita and then he drew me as Leif and I have a copy of the original illustration sitting above my desk as I write these words. It is absolutely masterful.

On the rooftop beneath the absent moon Leif has his head hung low towards his chest. Likely he is unconscious and we see that he is covered in cuts and bruises with bandages wrapped tight across his eyes. He wears a hacked together pacemaker strapped to his chest with a blinking red diode keeping a beat and lighting up his floral shirt as it blows open in the breeze casting a red

sunset hue on the hibiscus skyline that ripples across the fabric. It is fair to say that Leif does not look in great shape. His chest is rising and falling in accordance with at least a vague rhythm of life which is positive but then there is something else. The way he clutches a massive handgun resting in his lap or more accurately we should really describe it as some form of hand cannon given the diameter of its barrel. He grips it as though he hopes to fuse it into his bones. This gun makes me incredibly uncomfortable and perhaps the moral thing at this point to make clear is that the gun and the sword never actually draw blood or do any real harm and that the violence explicated beyond this point is cartoonish at best. But honestly this gives me no comfort at all with regards to why I was so taken by this violence in the first place.

As Katita stands on the rooftop she hears a low groan several octaves beneath her. It sounds like machinery. Perhaps two massive gears interlocking and turning into each other slowly generating a drone that rises from the pressure of their momentum. Something about the sound sinks into Katita. She looks as though a once absent sickness has spontaneously returned. Although you will not be tested on this later it is important to note that this sound is what you might call the white whale of the story. Just to keep in mind the impact it has on Katita.

To be completely open in the vein of ethical transparency let me state in another manner that this is a story that contains very little outside of assault after assault after assault. Every scene is a battle of some description. I used to imagine the book as a series of intense jazz

instrumental solos pressing up against each other to create a pulse racing cacophony of violent experience. For example from the carpark Katita is able to find two thick parallel wires that stretch out from the rooftop she and Leif are on that connect up to an apartment building around twenty metres on. We observe the nail biting tension of a nurse pushing an unconscious man in a wheelchair across flimsy wires wavering above a high expanse until they reach the balcony of an apartment that the wires connect to. Then we observe Katita slide open the door of the apartment only to surprise two elderly residents who are washing up plates at the sink. The couple stare at Katita and Leif for all of two seconds before they activate necklaces hanging around their necks with pendants that open up like spiders waking and unfolding their legs as slinking sheets of fine metal sheeting tunnel out of the pendants and spiral around the elderly couple creating these shiny exoskeletons that act as personal tank armour to protect them from home invasions such as this.

What follows is a dramatic pay per view title fight situation where in one corner with a combined weight of nearly three hundred kilograms from Newcastle they might be elderly but they will put you to bed early you know them as Mr and Mrs McRae but tonight they are the tag team known as the Mighty Mechas and in the other corner with a combined weight of one hundred eighty kilograms including the wheelchair from regions unknown we have some guy with a gun who is already out cold and looks like he should be either in an emergency ward or in

custody alongside his tag team partner wearing a medical military dress combination that could double as runway attire for bizarro fashion week with a sword as sharp as chalk dust it is the odd couple equation who have just committed home invasion Leif and Katita. Cue a massive battle scene in which Katita fends off the robotic attacks of the elderly couple until her sword becomes stuck in the metal folds of one of the mecha suits and she is on the verge of being crushed by the couple when suddenly a reality shredding blast decimates all known sensory boundaries and rips through the apartment as we see the Mighty Mechas tossed back hard against the wall of the kitchen leaving two big robot shaped holes in the apartment.

Katita spins around to see Leif sitting upright with his hand cannon pouring smoke out of its barrel. He breathes heavily as Katita rushes over to him and says something like good timing and then she moves behind him to wheel through the wreckage of the apartment so she can grab her sword and they can be on their way when suddenly Leif grabs the wheels of the chair in a panic and just starts yelling like crazy. Leif says what in the name of abstract blinking disco is going on here. He says holy caravan park I cannot see anything and I cannot feel my legs. When he tries to stand up he immediately collapses to the floor. Long story short Katita throws her head towards the ceiling in a give me strength gesture but then she also feels desperate sympathy et cetera so she helps him back into the chair and by the time he is sitting back in it he is completely unconscious again. She sees the mecha couple

standing in front of the hole they created in the wall and now they are lumbering towards Katita and Leif. Quick thinking Katita swings the wheelchair around so Leif is facing the balcony of the apartment and she raises his gun by manually lifting his arm up and then whilst standing on the back of the wheelchair she squeezes his hand hard so that the trigger is activated and the gun once again erupts a mighty blast that sends the two of them flying backwards across the apartment and into the robot couple like a bowling ball peeling through pins as Katita grabs her sword on the way through them and out into the hallway of the apartment building in a cloud of torn plasterboard and smoke and noise.

Okay. That is exactly the sort of thing I am trying to avoid. I got so caught up in the act that I started typing blow by blow in a way I am seeking to avoid. This is not an exercise in creating page turning prose. There is too much at stake for that. Let me clinically summarise what happens next. Over the duration of twenty pages of notes we see Leif once again start firing his gun through the hallway of the apartment building with Katita hanging on and screaming for him to stop. One of the blasts sends them both flying backwards into a storeroom where blankets and towels fall down upon them. Leif is unconscious again. Katita covers him in garbage bags and towels while she wraps a blanket around herself toga style and walks out into the hallway looking less like a war torn samurai nurse with high fashion sensibilities and more like an anonymous cleaner working late hours and just wanting to get the job done and go home. As she pushes Leif who

is sufficiently camouflaged to look like a trolley of soiled linen she is immediately spotted by residents in the hall. Or in another version of my notes she makes it to the end of the hallway before somebody starts questioning her and while she tries to come up with a suitable lie she can start to hear Leif waking up and shuffling beneath the garbage bags. Either way she is found out by the residents and Katita escapes by doing something like reaching for her sword beneath her blanket and swinging it into a nearby fire extinguisher which starts to foam erratically from the gash in the side of its cylinder before everything suddenly goes white and there is a deafening explosion as it rips to pieces in a roar of nitrogen and metallic shards that sear the area which in turn propels Katita and Leif down the hall and into the stairwell with Leif now completely awake and gripping hard against the sides of the chair desperately trying to not fall out as Katita holds to the back of the chair and curses as she struggles to turn the wheelchair at corners as it descends towards the ground floor as fast as gravity will take it.

Seconds later at the conclusion of the stairwell they both spill onto the floor in a mess of limbs as Katita drops her sword and it becomes lodged in one of the wheels of the chair causing it to flip over and land on top of them. A receptionist at the apartment lobby stares at them with mouth agape. She screams for the police. Katita stands up and neatens her hair and flattens the front of her dress and then reaches for the hand cannon and shoots it into the glass doors that lead onto the street. The glass shatters in a confetti shower that litters the floor. Leif picks

himself up off the floor and climbs back into the wheelchair as Katita pulls her sword from beneath the spokes of the wheelchair and taps it down into the sheath on her back. With head held high and looking nowhere but straight ahead she pushes Leif into the cool midnight air outside with a measured stride. She crushes the crumbled door glass beneath her heels as she walks on through.

Out on the street Katita finds a shadowed corridor between buildings to hide her and Leif as police cars wail on by. She reinforces the key message. They need to get to the beach by evening where a complicated surgery is going to take place. Katita says that while Leif has no memory and is in bad shape he should not worry because all of this will be resolved in time. The main contribution that Leif makes is to groggily fail at comprehending what is being said and to instead ask for some food. Specifically a hotdog if one is available at this time of evening. And so they make their way beneath the shadows of nearby apartments to an eatery where he gets just that.

Cue a scene where Leif is served a hotdog which he pushes into his mouth by first compressing a length of sausage into a mustard ensconced cube. The bun collapses around the cube of sausage in a ruin of yeast that disappears from concrete reality within seconds. Leif orders another bun at one point which he rips in half and hands one side of to Katita. He tells her to take a few steps back and put it to her ear. Talk into it he says. Like a telephone. Katita does so and Leif laughs uproariously. It should be noted here that Katita does not smile the entire novel until one of the final scenes. Anyhow the most

important plot point to note here is that the owner of the eatery comes up to Leif and Katita and asks them if they are in town for the protest happening later that morning. Katita is surprised. What protests. The eatery owner then goes on to inform them that Dirthheart activists are in the area to protest the overturning of a recent law that ensured that artificial intelligence living in the city or the countryside could in no way pretend to be human. Now that the law has been overthrown you could be talking to a robot that looks and sounds just like a human and it does not need to let you know that it is actually a robot. The Dirthheart activists are hyperorganic naturalists who would like to see anything powered by a battery or a wall socket ripped to pieces by wild dogs and then disposed of in an ecofriendly manner. They dress up as animals and wear animal masks. So on one side you are going to have people dressed up as animals and on the other side you are going to have robots dressed up as people and you will also have people wearing robot suits to protect themselves. And of course in the midst of all this the military police have begun swarming the city to keep things under control. This is a massive problem for Katita as it will significantly complicate potential trajectories across the city towards the beach.

I originally wrote a section that followed here where Katita and Leif were chased through the eatery by a military officer who spots them mucking around with the hotdogs buns. Our two protagonists escape through the kitchen out through the back fly screen door onto a steep downhill slope. The wheelchair is pretty banged up after

cascading down the stairwell of the apartment building. Its frame looks like it is actually trying to fall to pieces via some mechanical death drive to release itself from whatever physical turmoil has gripped it. The wheels are manically shuddering in a thousand chaotic micro-directions. Leif cannot grip the armrests of the wheelchair any harder or they will transmute into gas. Katita hangs onto the back of the chair and tries to somehow steer a straight path downwards by sticking her sword into the ground like a gondolier. As her sword stabs into the street it sends up a flower of golden sparks that leap into the darkness and bounce off Katita and her red shoes as she wonders briefly just how flammable her knee high socks are.

I deleted this just described section a couple of edits ago to replace it instead with a scene in which Katita is more languidly pushing Leif past the eatery in search of salt air on the breeze and the sound of waves. This leads to a scene whereby they walk beside a large sandstone post office which Leif puts his hands against and spontaneously has his first memory since waking in the wheelchair a few hours earlier with an empty mind. He remembers working in the post office as an intern and being trained as someone who is able to write beautiful letters for people who come into the post office and need assistance in writing a letter to family or a friend or a lover. He remembers a young guy asking if Leif could write a letter to a girl he had met and wanted to get to know better. Leif asked strategic questions. How did she walk. How did her eyes react when you talked about things that had happened in the past

compared to what might happen in the near future. What did her hands do when you laughed at something she said. Give me a sense of her shoe size. And then Leif created a rough landscape of pencil markings to form the kind of sentences that start to cast out their own source of light. But there were side effects to his increased literacy. His dreams became more vivid and intense as if extra dimensions had been added to them. He started falling in love with everything. One day he thought he saw an obelisk on a nearby hill fly out from its position and shoot right into the middle of a donut shaped town hall. Six months later the council building started to show that it was pregnant. The windows started to bulge. Office cubicles that were two by two metres were now four by four. Eventually it gave birth to a beautiful little taxation building. It had a new baby smell for months afterwards and talcum powder all over the floor.

While Leif recounts this memory he and Katita are initially oblivious to a military police officer who walks up and holds them captive at gunpoint. The officer tells Leif to get away from Katita as she is a witch who will kill him. Katita reluctantly throws down her sword and the officer tells her to get against the wall so he can search and handcuff her. The officer tries to take her medical kit off her belt by ripping at it in an aggressive manner. The whole tone here is that the officer is being very heavy handed with Katita all the while telling Leif that she is a demon and that he knows the weird medical experiments she does out there in the desert. Leif is wildly conflicted as he has no concrete reason to believe or not believe this

officer but at a strategic moment he follows his gut and literally launches himself out of his wheelchair and tackles the officer to the ground. He picks the officer up and handcuffs him to the wheelchair and pushes him down a steep hill. There is always a steep hill nearby. Katita points out to Leif that he can walk now. Now you might be wondering how a man can go from requiring a wheelchair one moment to being able to pick up an eighty kilogram military officer and deftly deposit them in a wheelchair only moments later. Ask yourself what might have caused him to literally rise to this occasion and perhaps later on towards the end of this story think back and ask yourself if this was not something that Katita may have orchestrated all along.

She takes Leif by the hand and they head to an old art deco cinema and a shopping centre connected to its side via an opaque umbilical walkway. Both buildings have unfiltered lemon lightglow beaming through them. They are entirely deserted. There is a history of garbage confettied on the floors but otherwise there are no signs of people. It is so bright inside not even ghosts or dreams of previous visitors remain. There is a sense of order and calm in there like a bank or an after hours public library or like shareware compact disks on magazines and memories of first love. Remember earlier I said I sometimes fantasise about taking my wife and unborn child to disappear into an anonymous quarter of the world and become a noncitizen and how in celebration of special occasions we would sneak out at nighttime and make our way into an abandoned shopping centre to play and fall asleep in. In

the mezzanine of this shopping centre Leif tries to go to sleep on the floor but his legs start cramping badly. Katita says that she has a light tranquilliser to give him. She gets Leif to take off his shirt and places her hands spread evenly on both sides of his spine and then injects a liquid cloud into his back. She rubs her hand over his shoulder blades and puts her face close up to his skin and looks over every millimetre of skin from one shoulder blade to the other. What is she looking for. Leif reclines and passes out.

Katita takes her sword and drags its blade across the floor which stirs up thick blankets of dust from the tiles. She draws in the dust like she is raking a zen garden. A cloud of dust billows upwards gently like a volcanic eruption in super slow motion. She teases the dust only to watch it settle down again on the floor before stirring it up for another bloom. Looking into the dust cloud Katita thinks about history. She thinks about history a great deal these days. Of course she does. Look at who she is and where she is. If someone asked her what she is doing she would say how do you want me to answer that. Not with words. Words can tell you nothing about what things really mean. They can only give you their own definitions. So what else. Numbers perhaps. Same thing. Another artificial construct. A synthetic creation approximating a space that words pretend to stay away from. Katita stirs her sword across the floor again and thinks about truth. Truth is whatever you can see in the suspended animation of this dust cloud. Have a look and take your pick from whichever grains of dirt and light and void and data take your fancy and then improvise on that theme and watch as

it all falls to the ground. Sure this might all mean nothing but let Katita tell you about this nothing. Let her tell you how she is going to change all that. It is time to get off the merry go round. Katita never wants to hear the sound of the earth rubbing against space again. No more meaningless revolutions around the sun. She wants no more nothing. This geometry stops now.

Leif coughs in the darkness. Katita goes over to where he is curled up against a school shoe display unit. She strokes his hair and runs her hand down his back again to his shoulder blades. As she lays her sword down she spills her exhausted body against his on the floor. Dust powders her face as she listens to the low thump of what could be her heart or at this range for all she knows it could be coming from Leif or it could be something else entirely. Surely not the beach at this distance although the sounds are not so dissimilar. Perhaps the sound of blood pumping in gushes through the chambers of the what are they called the channels of the coastal shelf no the atrium but is not that where they are now in an atrium and maybe that is why the noise is so.

Katita sleeps. End of Chapter One.

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Chapters Two and Three are primarily passages of action that take Katita and Leif on a parkour adventure between rooftop and street and a few critical spaces above and below. Katita wakes up and looks out the dusty

windows of the shopping centre that she and Leif fell asleep in. For what it is worth the dates I have written in my notebook from the time indicate that I started working on these chapters a couple of months after my wife and I were married. In fact the very view that Katita has while she looks over the city is one that I see in my mind from a location we visited on our honeymoon. Perhaps from a hotel or the food court of a shopping centre. I wrote a few embarrassing thoughts about the city in the margins of the notes for the start of Chapter Two. Perhaps they are what I imagined Katita would think as she planned their approach for the day.

I wrote that cities are formulas that in order to function need to subtract humans from the equation. A city with people is an overpopulated ecosystem. When the people disappear it realises the success of its form. In truth when I think about the autonomous vehicles being trialled in Newcastle this year perhaps these thoughts are not so embarrassing anymore. While watching the driverless bus do its circuit around the city with no passengers on it I imagine that it is operating as fully intended. Perhaps people just throw their laptops on the bus and as the computers travel around the city they drag data from the different quarters of the neighbourhood and compile this input into stats that they share with the other laptops on the bus and generate board reports that are distributed to mailing lists somewhere on the horizon. At the end of the day the bus stops just long enough for people to retrieve their laptops and nurse them home like children who have spent a long day at school. Now that is what I call an

embarrassingly teenage thought. Fight the power. But what forever are we if not the product of our teenage dreams.

The main narrative trigger for Chapter Two is a scene in which Katita actually does observe school children heading off through the city for the day. She watches them running and biking and kicking stones and hauling backpacks and climbing up on walls tagged with rainbow graffiti with invented names and stencil art of birds filled with painted linguistic splash and post game verb drippings all hyperreal and awake as the children balance and bump into each other with the best sort of clumsy abandon of constantly detuned missteps in a tumble down the footpaths beneath jigsaw daylight all cherry and layered. Katita sees too a small mountain of treadmills and weight machines discarded out the back of a gym. She thinks that with a few streams of magnetic tape and a couple of alligator clips you could create a pretty powerful robot from that equipment. A wrestler perhaps that might lumber down the street with giant elephant legs cycling on the axis of an exercise bike in cardiac swoon as a sort of city protector. Katita wonders what the children would think of that. The children.

Children are an important idea to hold in mind as they play a role after a few pages of notes in which Katita leaves to find a quick breakfast to bring back for Leif while in the meantime he wakes up and is terrified that he cannot find Katita because he cannot see and he has been left on the floor of some who knows where shopping centre in the midst of his traumatic memory loss. Katita soon returns and apologises and they enjoy an egg muffin

together before setting out from the rooftop of the shopping centre towards further connecting rooftops that promise to take them closer to the beach without having to touch the ground and navigate through what they can hear of the already emerging violent clashes down on the street between protestors and police. Smoke is rising up above the lips of the carparks and rooftop courtyards they are hurrying across.

Leif probably asks Katita to explain again what the protests are all about and Katita would say something like it is always the same damn thing. Every protest and conflict appears to be hot versus cold and up versus down. Thesis versus antithesis. She would say that this is what people think but it is just an illusion. History is not a clash of ideas like two magnetic opposites being pushed together. The magnets are not opposites at all. They are the same poles. Not positive and negative coming together to hit against each other. They are negative poles and negative poles facing each other and very purposefully so. The intention is that they will repel each other in such a way that they end up spinning around one another in perpetual momentum.

I imagine Katita moving her hands around each other to demonstrate this idea but of course Leif would not be able to see it. She would say Leif this is what keeps the world moving. Literally it is what keeps the world spinning in the direction it is going. The illusion of conflict is that there are two sides to every coin. Let me tell you. There is one side to a coin and it goes the whole way around and around and around we go.

Onward across the rooftops and Leif and Katita come into contact with a half dozen Dirthheart activists wearing a menagerie of fabric animal masks. Say the activists are weary and then what if Katita does not help things by telling them how facile their efforts are. Perhaps one of the activists lobbs a smoke bomb at our protagonists and then boom. Leif again uses some sort of second sight and shoots the bomb out of the sky which covers the rooftop in smoke. Once more with the fetishisation of violence. One version of my notes say that Leif and Katita then make their way via the rooftop into a building they need to move through in order to get to the next building across. To their surprise they walk right into a preschool.

First though let me just step back in time a moment to the rooftop with the activists and the smoke bomb again. What if after Leif shoots the bomb a low sound starts to resonate across the smoke filled area. For a moment Katita worries that it is the same droning noise she heard coming from the car park at the start of the story but this present sound is different. It sounds like a deep flapping that warps the air around them back and forth. Katita looks up to see a gigantic seagull hovering above the rooftop. Its metal wings are flapping on such a large scale that it threatens to blow everybody off the top of the building. The seagull opens its beak and squawks an intense digital cry and Katita grabs Leif by the arm and pulls him through a doorway that leads to their surprise to a preschool classroom. Yes we will keep that addition to the scene because it connects well to something else a little later in the story.

Back to the preschool. They enter the room and see twenty or more children all around three or four years of age. A barrage of little voices start up. Who are you. Where are our teachers. Why do you have bandages over your eyes. Can you see. Are you a nurse. Is that a real sword. Are you here to save us. Long story short the children have been abandoned in the preschool by their teachers who are surprise surprise the Dirtheart activists out on the rooftop probably still struggling beneath the wings of that giant seagull. Katita is upset and uncomfortable in the presence of these abandoned children and wants to get out of the room right now. She looks around for a wall to cut her sword through so she and Leif can get out of there.

Meanwhile Leif is already sitting down with the kids and telling them stories. The children are sitting in front of him and leaning against him and climbing on his shoulders. Katita looks as though she is about to cry. Say one of the children goes to remove the bandages that Leif is wearing to cover his eyes and Katita runs over and pushes their little hand away and says do not touch that. The child asks why and Leif says it is because he has had an accident and his eyes need to slowly recover. One of the children sitting in front of Leif says that they had heart surgery just after they were born. Leif says that he thinks he needs to have surgery on his heart too and he points to his external pacemaker. Katita does all she can at this point to stop herself from breaking down. She thinks oh Leif. There is nothing wrong with your heart. And there is no surgery to fix what is wrong with mine.

When the Dirtheart activist preschool teachers return to the classroom they are confronted by Katita. One of the protestors says hey we were only gone for a couple of minutes the kids were fine. Katita takes out her blade and holds it within range of the necks of each of the protestors. She delivers a monologue in which she chastises the protestors and teaches them about the quote unquote nightmare of history and how they are contributing to the literal revolution of the earth spinning around and around with no cogent exit strategy. Idiots.

From here the rest of Chapter Two follows Katita and Leif as they end up on street level after Leif falls down a tree that he and Katita were climbing to get to another rooftop carpark. On the street it is absolute chaos with violent clashes all around. Katita grips onto Leif and tries to pull him through a safe trajectory in direction of the beach but then a water cannon from a military tank blasts through a dense crowd of Dirtheart activists and industrialist entrepreneurs in heavy robot armour which sends everybody sliding along the street. Katita and Leif lose hold of each other and in the frenzy of people being arrested and fighting and escaping they cannot find each other again. Desperate to take control of the situation Katita climbs into a robot armoured suit that somebody has abandoned. It has rocket boosters that allow it to rise off the ground. A military officer storms forward to take Katita down but she swiftly deposits her sword in the hand of the robot armour and swings it hard into the gun of the military officer which neatly slices the gun in half. She activates the rocket boosters to see if she can rise above the

crowd to find Leif and then wham. A massive rubber bullet knocks her out of the sky. An officer grabs at her armour as Katita leaps away and flees from the area but in the process she leaves her sword and medical kit behind. Notes here describe how while all this was going on Leif found himself a hiding space beneath the stairwell of a nearby doorway where he sits and listens for any sign of Katita in the environmental cacophony around him. Meanwhile Katita has now found safety behind the doorway right next door to where Leif is although neither of them realise their neighbouring proximity.

From here an extended action scene occurs in which Katita is spotted by military officers which prompts her to run up a flight of stairs to avoid them but then oh man she finds herself trapped in a dance studio with no way to get out. By chance Leif hears nearby officers shouting that they have Katita cornered and so he rushes next door to where he hears the commotion and on the way he bumps into and then manages to scoop into his arms two smoke bombs from off the ground which he then runs with up the flight of stairs to where officers are yelling at Katita to get down on the ground. If you were there with Leif you would have noticed that the run up the stairs has made his external pacemaker go totally crazy at this point. His heart is beating like a drill. Katita yells something to Leif like give them two of the best or hey Leif take two or bombs away or whatever and then Leif throws each smoke bomb in the air and shoots them both like exploding clay pigeons. The room becomes a plumb of smoke as Leif this time is the one to reach out to Katita and grip her so as to

pull her through the smoke and out the door and up a service stairwell that leads to yet another rooftop of another building.

When they reach the rooftop Katita can see that there is a giant metal nest up there filled with metal eggs the size of caravans. She asks Leif how his heart is feeling. He holds his chest and says it feels stronger than it has all day. Katita rips off the external pacemaker and throws it over the edge of the building. She smiles and tells him that he has no need for that thing anymore. Seconds later the area is rocked by a thunderous explosion. Did the pacemaker blow up. Katita runs to the edge of the building to see that across the road the huge mechanical bird that they saw earlier has flown into the sandstone facade of the city post office nearly wiping out half the building as a result. The bird looks up at Katita from the ground and tries to fly out of the rubble of the building towards her. It screeches at Katita but cannot get loose from the debris that has covered its wings. Katita runs over to Leif and says this is our chance to escape and get to the beach while everyone is busy with that bird. They find a construction elevator that lowers down the back of the building. As it slowly descends to the ground Katita tells Leif a story that her father told her when she was a young girl. It is the story of Rico the architect.

If Newcastle was the town in which Rico practiced his architecture and you were to listen very carefully next to the body of another person you would hear myriad sounds you might not expect to hear from the inside of a body. Were you to listen next to a preschool teacher you

may hear the rattle of train carriages rolling past a harbour station. Place your ear to the chest of a baker in the bread shop down the road and you may be able to discern the echo of swing seats jangling in the park. And if you listened closely near a military officer behind their eyes you may hear a faint pizzicato of leaves tapping against tall glass windows. You see Rico was the youngest in a long line of architects that sprawled out through generations of his family. However unlike the others who had dedicated their lives to traditional town planning and building design our Rico here had developed an amazing new conception of architecture. He was the first architect in history to facilitate the construction of functioning and constantly active cities within the bodies of other people.

Now most everybody in the region had been to see Rico and receive the fruits of his labour by having elaborate towns built within the spare muscle and bone cavities of their bodies. Early on after Rico had first started practicing this new skill on his family he had a young nephew who fell one day over a sharp wire fence. Rather than blood gushing from the laceration instead a tumble of colourful cars and buses fell out of his body onto the ground like lollies from a jar. This was all fine but here is the thing. Rico was unable to use this talent within his own body. He was unable to build cities within himself. He tried standing in front of a mirror in an attempt to both teach and do at the same time but it was useless. The predicament left Rico feeling terribly alone.

Rico takes a walk through town and passes behind a row of shops where a small gathering of children are

running and tumbling in all directions as if engaged in battle with an invisible beast. Now Rico knew that children are very good at reimagining the world so perhaps they may be able to help him develop a solution to his problem. After a quick chat the children exchange funny glances with each other and resume playing their game. Unfortunately for Rico his problem was too small for these children to improvise a new reality. They were only interested in big apocalyptic problems that threatened to smash the world to pieces and so Rico kept on walking.

He then finds himself in the town square watching a couple in tender embrace near a memorial fountain. Rico thinks to himself that since lovers are famous for their repertoire of private notions they share between each other perhaps they would know of a secret to solve his dilemma. He converses with the couple for a minute before tipping his hat and bidding farewell. He realises of course that secrets only exist when they are not shared outside the private language in which they are born. Unfortunately for Rico he always lived on the outside.

So at this point Rico is totally lost. He looks around the city and throws his arms in the air. Nobody can help him. He is a teacher unable to experience his own knowledge. But lucky for Rico all of this was about to change. A lady named Mylar wearing a crisp white coat crosses the town square towards Rico. He knows of her as she too is quite famous in the region as the youngest daughter born to a family of prominent medical professionals. She is held in very high regard for her surgical prowess. Mylar walks up to Rico and reaches both

her hands to his and holds them gently and stuns him by saying that everything is going to be ok for she knows just how to help him.

They walk the town together going inside this building and that. In the town hall Mylar says this is the finest building in our city and of any other that I have been in. Rico is flattered as it was his family who designed it. The town hall is composed of intricate columns that twist with möbius sway upwards through the chambers and the effect that is given is that of a living universe moulded in the shape of a building. They walk the floors and touch the walls and Mylar says something to Rico. She says that she is in a similar situation to the one he is in. Being the youngest in her family she has lived beneath the expectations that have been put upon her by generations of family members who themselves have surpassed all number of incredible medical milestones. She praises Rico for his achievement that allows individuals to live with new worlds within them as if their dreams have taken on the form of internal civilisations. And she says that she too has achieved something similar. Something that she hopes will give Rico what he seeks.

Mylar has Rico press his hand against the wall of the town hall. Upon first grace of the surface he can feel something change within his body and outside his body as if his head is beginning to fill the space of the room. He is startled and draws his hand away from the wall and presses it against his head to make sure everything is still the right size. Mylar smiles at Rico and reaches her hand out to him. Rico stares into her eyes like say a rock might look upon a

comet. He smiles and nods and gives her his hand and Mylar says something to him that he can barely hear. Something like this is my surgery or this is your answer Rico. Now watch as the stones of the town hall become swapped with the feet Rico once had. His body grows in and out of the building. A centimetre of his body becomes a metre of the town hall. His arms become wall frames and his eyes become broad windows that face the city. Outside there is a shout in the street as a crowd begins to approach with the sort of frantic caution that manifests when a miracle is in action. After some time of looking at the scene there were observers who would later decode their memories and recall that they saw the walls of the town hall gently expand and contract as if it were breathing and that the glass windows shimmered with illumination as if a warm crimson glow was pulsating from inside. The doorway leading into the foyer seemed to the more perceptive amongst the observers to have the slightest warp to it. The visual echo perhaps of a contented smile.

At the conclusion of the story the construction elevator taps Katita and Leif down against the street. Katita asks Leif what he thinks of the story and Leif says I knew every word of it before you said it. Why do I know this story as if I have lived it before. Katita pulls at his arm and says come on. There is going to be a complicated surgery on the beach tonight.

End of Chapter Two.

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Chapter Three is the last before the first half of the story finishes. Leif and Katita take the opportunity that has opened up after the massive bird crashed into the side of the post office to see what the most direct path to the beach is going to be. First they locate the sword that Katita dropped earlier which has curiously been left untouched in the middle of the street. There are roadblocks set up all across the city and unfortunately there is little opportunity to get to the beach through any of the usual routes without engaging in a brawl with military police.

One consideration that Leif wonders is whether the harbour where ships enter Newcastle port connects in some manner to the beach. Katita says it absolutely does. Leif suggests that there may well be a way to get to the harbour through underground tunnels or pipes that were often laid in the founding years of a city of this heritage. This is Leif speaking from his engineering background and perhaps another source of knowledge. Katita remembers seeing a street art mural on a nearby corner that shows a painting of an underground swimming pool. As a bit of trivia this mural does actually exist and behind it really does lead down to what used to be a large stone swimming pool beneath the centre of Newcastle with water that would flow in from the harbour. At first it was a place for local coal miners to go and wash off after a day at work but it transformed shortly after into a communal family destination beneath the city. Eventually it was closed and the council instead opened a number of above ground public pools that contained more modern facilities with hot chips and ice cream and all the rest. Fortunately for Leif

and Katita the pool is still completely accessible which they realise after a swift carve of the blade that Katita sends through the mural revealing a dark stairwell that our protagonists follow down until it indeed reaches a big underground stone swimming pool. Almost no visible light is able to make it down to the pool and even though it looks like the area has been sealed off and unused for perhaps decades there is a surprising freshness to the air and to the water that means there must be a current source of both elements actively streaming in from somewhere nearby.

In the original draft of my notes for this scene I had Katita looking around for a way through the pool to the harbour when she hears a sudden splash as Leif has cast off his clothes and jumped in for a swim. He tells her to join him. It is dark down there and besides he has bandages on his eyes so what is he going to see if she strips off for a dip. This is only a lightly fictionalised version of something my wife and I did when we went for a road trip many years ago after we were first married. It was late at night and we were driving through a small country town of the satellite variety housing perhaps five or six streets nestled between hills and two long expanses of hour long highway on both sides. We had been driving all day and were hoping to reach a motel still a significant distance south by daybreak so we could begin to rest. It had been a phenomenally hot summer and we had the windows down for any sort of relief as we slowed through this little town and spotted a public swimming pool next to a football field. Within mere seconds we had parked the

car and jumped into the water together and we must have spent well over an hour floating around in that pool and just chatting and laughing about who knows what. We had run out of conversation on the road and had been at ease in our silence but now the water had brought back sensory memories and new ideas and hopes that kept us talking until our bodies started to prune. We dried off with picnic blankets from the car and got back on the highway. I remember we made it to the motel by midday the next day and we sort of somnambulated around the yard and the neighbouring blocks of the motel in a daze with sun blurring our tired eyes until we had an early dinner at a nearby pizzeria and crashed out in bed with a major sense of accomplishment that we had made it to night time before we allowed our bodies to finally sleep.

Again the original notes for this scene in the story had Katita and Leif swimming together in the pool before finding a historic underground passageway that lead right through the floor of a bathroom in a train station. However I omitted an earlier scene that heavily involved the train station to which this narrative would have logically connected so for ease of comprehension let us just say that Katita and Leif are in the pool together holding their clothes above their heads as they wade on through and then as hoped they indeed find a passage at the end of the pool that they follow and can feel a much welcome increase in natural airflow and yes even the sound of the ocean as they locate an outlet at the conclusion of the passage where water is lapping in through a pipe from the harbour. They climb on through and plunge into deep water.

To the west is the coal loader and the fisheries while the south east leads around the bluff to the beach. They are not given any time to plot their swimming course however as a screeching comes overhead and rips them out of the water. It is the bird from earlier after having freed itself from the debris of the post office it is now holding Leif and Katita in its claws while it carries them high across the city. I say claws but to be clear they are essentially metal grapples that you would find on the front of an excavator which in this case seem to be connected to a pneumatic arm that inserts into what sounds like the engine of the bird. Katita is facing straight up and holding her sword against her body while Leif is pressed against her as he struggles against his position which depending on his movements could threaten at any moment to see him sucked from the grip of the bird and ejected to some distant corner of the city.

Listen Katita says. I can take one good swing at this bird to get us both out of here together but if it works I have no idea where we are going to land. You are going to have to tell me when to swing. Leif is as stunned at this line of thinking as you likely are. Why me he yells into the wind. But then he really has no need at all to ask this as he knows perfectly well as likely you do too by this stage. Leif waits for another fifteen seconds and then yells now. Katita swings her sword into the pneumatic arm holding the claw that is gripping them which severs its connection and immediately releases our two protagonists as they fall out of the sky for only a couple of seconds before they land and roll across a tiled balcony. You might guess where

they have landed. It is the balcony of the apartment from the start of the story that Katita wheeled Leif to from the car park before they had the brawl with the robotically armoured elderly couple. Circle of life.

Not wanting to risk heading back into the apartment Katita guides Leif with the utmost care to grab onto the wires leading to the opposite car park and hand over hand climb along the couple of metres that take them above the yawning chasm of the city below and to the top of the car park where they began their journey. Katita listens and hears nothing. No droning noise from below. That is fine. She and Leif head down through the network of concrete ramps that take them to street level. As they reach the ground something causes Leif to jump backwards. He says I have just had the strangest sensation. Katita can see what has caused it. There is a handmade wooden cart vehicle thing on the street out front of the car park. It has what looks like a rocket propulsion system hooked up to the back of it. Most of the cart is in pretty rough shape after having been in an accident or similar as if it has tumbled down this road or run into a wall or whatever. Katita pulls Leif away from it and says come on we are nearly at the beach. Which is surprisingly true. The car park is mere metres from the beach.

Now here at this critical narrative juncture I am tempted to write this up in some sort of ecstatic prose that stretches across pages of detail described in a state of pathos infused suspended animation but I know better than that now. What if I just say instead that as they walk from the carpark to the beach Leif starts to feel increasingly

unwell and disconnected from the concrete reality of every new footstep that takes him closer to the beach. He says to Katita that he is feeling very light. He has memories that he is not sure really are memories. Leif asks if he can get a drink of water from somewhere as he feels like he is going to faint. He asks Katita if they can go to her place. Katita squeezes his hand. I live a long way from here she says. She knows what he is going through. We can wash your face in the water at the beach in just a moment she says as she pulls Leif across the road and finally onto the sand. Leif says I can see light starting to come through my bandages. I think I can see something. Katita tells him to not take the bandages off just yet. Leif is hard to understand now. His words are not coming out quite right. Katita tells him to not try and talk. Just relax. You have done so well.

Katita lays Leif down on the beach. He is trying to blink beneath his bandages as he stares up into the fading technicolour glow of the evening sky. His mouth is trying to speak but nothing is coming out now. Katita collapses next to him utterly exhausted. She leans against him and listens to his breathing which is slow and deep like he is both going to sleep and gently waking up. Kissing him on the cheek Katita says I am so sorry for what you are going to have to go through next but it is the whole reason we are here. She says we need to break the cycle. The ocean is crashing down in salty laps just metres from where they have collapsed. High in the sky there is a seagull circling the beach. The percussion of violence sings out its intention from a few streets over. Katita sits up and starts

to fold back the bandages so Leif can open his eyes. He blinks slowly and it takes a moment for his blue eyes to focus on the room around him.

There is a white fan above Leif spinning in slow circles and there is a breathing apparatus he is hooked up to that is casting out gentle hisses of sound as it rises and falls. In the middle of his gradually clearing view is Katita wearing a surgical mask and scrubs. She smiles down at Leif as he stares at her and then strafes his view around this little hospital room in the middle of where. There are windows on each of the walls that Leif can turn his head to see a desert landscape through. Katita touches Leif on the shoulder.

She says how are you feeling.

And then she says.

Honey.

I know you have just woken up.

But.

We need to go for a drive.

Cue curtains. End of Chapter Three.

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It is seven thirty in the morning and Leif rolls himself off the surgical table he has been unconscious on for how long. The surgery is located in say the far west of New South Wales. Katita fills Leif in on a few details such as that he is a military engineer who has had a bad accident but now he needs to get his strength together and drive her

into the city. There are urgent medical supplies that are required on the beach tonight. This is not a drill. So what does Leif do. What does he remember of what we know from the first half of this story. Probably nothing. His mind is likely as blank as when he first started to regain consciousness in the apartment while battling the elderly couple. If we had more detailed prose here perhaps we would hear Leif question more or push back or throw ideas around within his interior monologue but as this is just an outline let me just say that he is fundamentally inclined to follow whatever Katita puts to him. This is not so much because he is under a spell but rather he just spontaneously feels that Katita has his best interests at heart. Perhaps it is similar to the feeling of waking up in a daze and you hear the voice of someone giving you instructions from another room in the house and you just go along with it because they sound like someone you might possibly love.

Before long Leif is in a beat up sedan driving Katita and her box of medical supplies along a dusty outback road. His driving is as stable as you might imagine for a man who has just woken up after some ambiguous period of surgery. He tries to keep the car straight however he is like a dodgy shopping trolley leaning more to the left than he is aware and soon the car is orbiting in great circles as if it is tracing out the rings of Saturn in the red dust of the outback. Katita just closes her eyes and patiently counts down in some voiceless sequence of numbers until Leif manages to balance himself out and straighten his trajectory along the desert roadway. That is until the car breaks down moments later.

Now here is the thing. Katita has two combustion exhaust attachments in the boot of her car that might be best described as temporary engine upgrades. They hook up to the exhaust of the car and cause the fuel to engorge in a manner that ratchets up the maximum speed of the vehicle to a ridiculously high degree. It can be used without an exhaust in which case it simply draws upon surrounding air to provide a somewhat shorter but no less intense burst of energy that can propel a car shaped object forward across a great distance. Katita connects one of these attachments to the car and tells Leif they only have one more in the boot and they should not use it unless absolutely critically necessary. Okay. Whatever absolutely critically necessary means. As anticipated the car shoots along like a rocket crossing the desert until the combustion expires and they neatly roll nearly the entire rest of the way towards a service station.

Now on the horizon of the outback scenery here there are gigantic dark shapes lumbering in a manner that from the perspective of Leif and Katita would appear to be steadily getting closer. Katita knows exactly what they are and explains to Leif that they are autonomous diesel powered farming machines harvesting the wheat on the plains. After a period of perhaps five or twenty pages of detail it would become apparent just how much distance the harvesters gain on our protagonists as Leif and Katita both get out of the car and push it the five hundred metres or so required to make it to the service station. As they push the car up to the station Leif is beginning to recoil from something in the air. It is a sound. A high pitched

frequency timbering across the environment. Leif cringes and asks what the sound is and Katita says it is the method by which the farming robots communicate with each other. She tells Leif that these machines will try to stop them from getting to the beach. There is a radio tower some hundred kilometres that way. If we can get to it we can disrupt their signals and they will cease following us. By this stage Leif and Katita have heaved their car up to the garage in the back of the service station and a mechanic who immediately recognises them steps up to Leif.

Who knows how it has done so but with long aphoristic legs one of the autonomous diesel harvesters has traversed the landscape and made it to the service station in a move that angers Katita immensely. She yells to the mechanic to fix their car for them quickly as she grabs a pipe and launches herself from a pile of tyres straight at the neck of the harvester where she attacks it mercilessly. Leif is only marginally paying attention to this as he looks into the face of the mechanic and tries to decode where he knows him from and then it clicks. This is the same man who held Katita up at gunpoint before Leif tackled him into the side of a post office and then strapped him into a wheelchair and pushed him down a hill. But these details do not entirely compute with Leif. He stares at the mechanic with fright and wonders if his memory is real or perhaps whether all of this is just a post surgery illusion. The mechanic smiles warmly at Leif so how could he also have been the military officer he attacked.

Sounds like you have somewhere to be the mechanic says to him. Let me look at your motor. As the

mechanic works on the car he gestures to Katita who is still in hand to hand or perhaps rather scythe to pipe combat with the harvester and the mechanic says oh boy you need to be careful with that one. Leif says you mean the robot and the mechanic laughs and pats Leif on the back. He says no I mean your girl over there. She is trouble. I would encourage you to get in this car when it is running again in a minute and drive out of here and leave her behind. I know her from these parts and let me tell you she is pure unfiltered trouble. But then the mechanic pats Leif on the back again and says but I know how it is. Pretty girl in a chaotic world. How can you say no.

The car starts up and sounds like it is running well when kaboom there is a massive explosion but not from the car. Come on. It is the head of the harvester flying into the sky and then slamming onto the ground right next to Leif and the mechanic. Katita climbs out of the head with her pipe and a handful of electronics. She is covered in oil from head to toe.

Thanks for fixing our car up she says to the mechanic. Will these robot electronics cover payment for your work. The mechanic smiles warmly again at Leif and gives him a nod and then here is the thing. As Leif watches the mechanic walk away and sees Katita throw the pipe in the backseat of the car he has this disorienting feeling that he has seen all this happen before. As the mechanic walks away it is as if he is watching ten different layered versions of the same mechanic walking away all just slightly out of sync with each other. When Katita throws the pipe on the backseat of the car the pipe fans into the car like a dozen

pipes are all connected and drifting through the air. It feels as if twenty versions of Katita are walking towards him as he blinks and tries to reset his vision. Katita says hey Leif. There is a big watering hole around ten minutes in that direction. I need to clean myself up.

From here we have a few strategic scenes that seek to reveal some of the intentions and backstories that bind the narrative together. Leif and Katita drive to a watering hole attached to a muddy creek that is necklaced by immense red boulders where they park and Katita climbs over the backseat of the car to find a spare singlet. She hands Leif the pipe she used as a weapon against the harvester and tells him to swing it at any crocodiles that head her way. Crocodiles. Yes a half dozen of the saltwater pebble lizards are soaking up the sun all the way down the creek. She says swing your pipe as much as you care to Leif but make sure to keep your eyes on those crocs. Katita strips down out of her oil soaked medical gear and walks into the watering hole. She rinses her red hair and splashes water over herself and Leif has not yet looked at the crocodiles.

Instead he is looking at a large low flying machine like some long black cloud that appeared from behind a nearby rise of earth blocking view of the horizon. It soars slowly over the red boulders on the other side of the watering hole and then over Katita. It nearly touches her as it is flying only around seven or eight feet off the ground. Leif asks what it is and Katita throws it a peace sign and tells Leif it is a military surveillance drone. They are all over the outback. She says it is an old model likely

decommissioned and just using up the remainder of its fuel until it one day falls to the ground and takes on a second life as a weed covered mound. Katita says that the new models of the drone look less like storm clouds and more like birds. As it flies over the bask of crocodiles it becomes spontaneously decommissioned as one of the bigger crocs commits to a massive vertical leap and snaps the drone right out of the air dragging it to the ground.

The drone gives off a few loud cracks from inside its shell which could be the shattering of its battery units or some other internal physical response that gives cause for the crocodiles to shuffle back from its metal carcass. As they move on down the creek and while Katita is getting dressed I would have Leif go over to the drone to look inside and huh would you look at that. There are thousands of instant photographs spilled around the interior having fallen out of an instant camera hooked up to the front of the drone that looks as though it has been taking photos for as long as it has been flying in the sky. Some of the photos show many months and possibly years of seasonal transition so this is not just a record of the last few hours or days.

The most recent photograph to fall out of the box is a photo of Katita flashing the peace sign. Leif takes that one and puts it in his pocket. He rummages through some of the other photographs. Many of the shots are of animals and farming communities across the outback and the plains. One of the photographs appears to have Katita in it again. She is standing near a wheat field with a man who Leif does not recognise. He flicks through a dozen more

photographs and sees a photo of the same man but this time the man is standing precariously atop a car that looks to be driving at high speed. He takes these photographs with him and goes to find Katita.

Katita waves him over and says thanks for leaving me alone with the crocodiles while you played with that machine. Leif says hey look at this. He shows the photograph of Katita with a man standing near a wheat field. This would profoundly shock Katita but being a professional she would moderate how she visualises this on her face. Say she points to the man in the photograph. Leif. That is you.

I need to admit my complete failing here at providing a glancing summary of this story. Already I have provided much more detail than I ever intended. It is so easy to slip into projecting what a novelisation of this story could have been if I believed in the suitability of that format. I do not want to linger much longer in this story before I move on to telling you about what happened in Shanbudia but perhaps I should first explain that I have so many back stories for how Katita and Leif came to be wrapped up in this world that it is hard to know which of the hundreds of vignettes at this particular point in this particular version of the story will support a suitable exit transition as we approach the conclusion. I have a scene in mind that I thought I had previously described but after scrolling through my words I realise I have not mentioned it at all so far.

In some parts of my outline I insert memories that Katita has of being on a beach during a period of military

service. The memories are fragmentary and heavily impressionistic. Early on in the story Katita has a memory where she is standing on the beach and looking out at gigantic waves. The water is dark and violent and she hears a noise in the waves. Suddenly she is soaking wet and sinking into the sand and as she sinks the earth emits a reverberating groaning sound that makes her feel like she is going to vomit. There are many variations on this theme of Katita remembering herself on a beach and looking out at the waves.

Later in the story Leif has his own memory that ties these beach recollections together. His memory is likely triggered by looking at the photographs of himself that he recovered from the fallen drone. Leif remembers being a military engineer working overseas somewhere. A foreign conflict zone near a beachfront. He is working with a team to structure a roadway that can run parallel to the beach across a stretch of dusty tundra and onto where the beginnings of a new city are being established. On the beach itself near where Leif and his team are working there are medical practitioners who are tending to some refugee families who are sporadically arriving on the shore by way of inflatable rafts. The water is rough and he keeps looking over to a redhead nurse who is performing some basic triage on a refugee family who have just arrived. She is checking their health and providing warm clothing and liquids to the parents and children.

As Leif returns focus to his work he hears a cry from the beach. Everybody down there has turned to face the waves. Leif and his team look to see what is happening

and then one of them points into the water and spots what is going on. A small boy has been taken by the waves. Nobody appears to want to go in and try to save the boy perhaps because the ocean is so violent and the boy has already been taken quite a distance away from shore. The redhead screams and runs into the water and tries to swim through the waves only to get slammed back against the beach. She tries again and gets even less of the way into the water before she is picked up and dumped once more. Leif looks around at his colleagues who are standing and impotently watching and now he is already running up an embankment that overlooks the beach with unbridled intensity as he pounds forward up the cliff elevation until he can see down onto where the boy was last seen in the waves. Without hesitation Leif leaps from the edge and dives into the ocean.

The nurse locked onto him from the moment he jumped and in her disbelief she tracked his long descent into the waves. She stares into the water for any sign of him or the boy. The leap into the ocean was a huge one. Really it was an absolutely insane thing to do. Half a minute later Leif is pummeled back onto the beach by the waves and he is in bad shape. His body is arranged in postures that a body is not meant to go into. He might be dead. The nurse who is of course Katita runs over to him and throws her body onto his. She starts to perform resuscitation procedures and when other medical staff go over to help her she yells at them to go away. You are all useless cowards. That boy is still out there in the waves. Leave this man to me. Katita drags him on a stretcher

across the beach to a triage tent. Leif cannot remember this part of the memory of course. He was unconscious from the moment he hit the water.

This part of the memory might be something that Katita can recall later in the story but for the most part it is all illusory and dreamlike in a way that allows her to feel some phantom sensory and emotional experiences from that day on the beach but that is about all. It is too painful for her to look at directly and retain anything except the core sensation she was left with beyond that day as she returned on a medical flight home to Australia with Leif still unconscious beside her. She arrives in Sydney and organises to drive an ambulance with Leif in the back all the way to her home and makeshift surgery out the back of New South Wales. As she drives she is able to reflect somewhat on what a horrendously tragic situation that has all been. The foreign conflict and the immigration crisis and the boy lost at sea and how hopeless she felt and how angry she was at nearly everybody around her except this brave man unconscious in the back of the ambulance. He had shown her that not everybody is content to let fate take hold of a situation. Perhaps you do not just have to passively watch the world keep spinning around without fighting back.

After many months of recovery Leif is able to walk again. He helps out on the farm at the back of the surgery connected to where Katita lives. There are honestly fifty or more vignettes I have written just covering Leif working in the wheat fields for example the time he was playing with local dogs and he saves one of

them from a drone harvester at the expense of his face being scanned by the harvester with his likeness then being uploaded into a neural network for all the other drones to learn about and track instead of their image software otherwise focusing on cutting wheat and so on and so on. Leif cannot recall anything of his previous life let alone what happened overseas on the beach that day and whatever remembered sensations or narratives that Katita can identify from that experience is not really of critical interest here. What is important is what she does with this new philosophy that she carries within her and it is this which we witness and see unfold as a complicated surgery that will take place on the beach tonight.

The end of Chapter Four sees Leif and Katita reach a radio satellite station structure that appears to be sending out signals to the surrounding autonomous harvesters and potentially the flying black cloud drones too that have slowly been making their way towards our protagonists across the past couple of hours. We have radar igloos on an island an hour out of Newcastle that were erected during the second world war that I based this part of the narrative on. While Leif has been driving his vision has become increasingly double and tripled at times with many different echoing layers of concrete reality overlapping in ways that he keeps trying to blink out of sight. His shoulders are also really starting to throb as if there is a deep pressure rising up from his muscles to the surface of his skin. The pain and blurred vision increase dramatically as he walks up to the open doors of the radio igloo.

Katita tells him that if he can get inside and turn the radio frequency up high enough it will be of a frequency that the robots cannot hear and it will also stop his eyes from blurring and his back from hurting. She says it will bring the frequency more in line with his bodies natural resonance. What she is referencing here is the idea that if you were to record the sound of the human body in an otherwise silent room it makes a super high pitched sound which is caused by the central nervous system vibrating against the spine which in turn renders the spine as a kind of tuning fork that emits what a sound level meter would determine is a high D for men and a high G for women. As Leif finds and dials the radio frequency up high enough his vision does indeed correct but his back still feels wrong. Katita lifts up his shirt and rubs her hands over the spots he is most hurting. There is definitely a pressure there. Remember back in the mezzanine of the abandoned shopping centre when Katita injects a liquid cloud into Leif. She reaches into her medical kit and does the same again to him now. He relaxes against a wall.

Perhaps at this stage in one version of this scene Katita could say hey Leif do you know what sound the earth makes when it is spinning in space. Although perhaps that would be giving too much away. Rather she might just say come on we need to get back on the road and head to the city before the light fades.

End of Chapter Four.

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Leif and Katita are back on the road for an hour before they see any sign of built up community. The landscape has turned from red desert to a blend of orange and green as pastureland and dry outcrops fuse into a rural country town that is reminiscent of ones I have spent voiceless nights in while on solo professional assignments in regional outposts. This is the sort of area I visualise Leif and Katita pulling into for a quick bite to eat before they drive the following couple of hours into Newcastle. Katita says to Leif you stay in the car while I get us some food. When she enters the bakery the shopkeeper working there recognises her straight away and says oh hi there how long has it been since you were last in. Was it yesterday. A fortnight ago perhaps. Or a month. No a year. Two sandwiches like always then will it be.

Katita probably nods in a way that shows her impatience and distaste for small talk. Then the baker would lean forward and look into Katita and say are you ok. You look so tired and if I may so say my dear you look quite a bit older than when I last saw you. Are you healthy or on drugs. You just look so very tired. And how does Katita react. I see her biting down hard on her lip and then ripping the sandwiches away from the baker and storming out of there. She flings the car door open and sits down next to an empty seat. Leif is gone.

He is standing a hundred metres away at the back of a crowd of locals who are laughing and cheering on some spectacle in the middle of a ring that two dozen of them have formed as they throw money down on the beer soaked ground. Katita already knows what is going on. She

exhales with nihilistic resignation and breathes in a belly full of fire as she walks up to Leif. In the middle of the crowd there is a large boar kicking its trotters against the dirt as it struggles to walk with a similarly sized mechanical grazing robot tied to its back with rope and a thick padlock. Each time the boar manages to stand up the robot flips itself over and starts shuffling away with the boar upside down on its back facing the sun. The moment this happens the boar goes wild and rolls its body back and forth until the robot flips over and they struggle against each other to see who will carry the other away. Leif grips the pipe he must have brought over from the car and looks as though he is about to start swinging it at the locals. Before he can do so Katita grabs it from him and leaps into the middle of the action. She slams the pipe down against the padlock between the boar and the robot causing it to shatter open and tear at the rope in the process. The boar runs free in one direction and the grazing robot shuffles off towards the nearest field. Katita points the pipe at the locals standing nearby and screams at them. You idiots. She yells you never outlearn your old mistakes. The reason the world keeps spinning in the same direction is because of shit like this. You are ruining everything.

The locals do not take too kindly to what has just happened and they try to grab Katita as she jumps through them and races to the car with Leif. Within seconds a car chase ensues through the streets in which all sorts of wild action takes place of which the most narratively important is that a piece of farming machinery is thrown from the balcony of a pub right onto the bonnet of the car our

protagonists are fleeing town in. The machine has rusty scythes that are flailing and slashing at the car. Leif and Katita duck down beneath the dashboard as the scythes smash the windscreen before Leif turns the car sharply and shakes it off as it takes one last slash at the car and tears through a back tyre. They have been barrelling along at a tremendous speed out of town in what Leif hopes is a vaguely correct direction when he turns to Katita for directions and sees that while she is staring straight ahead through the now broken windscreen she is also intensely sobbing. Leif slows down and is about to ask what is wrong before Katita says to keep driving. She says please just keep driving. Katita cries into her hands and then pushes her face into the side of her chair and continues to cry until she falls asleep.

We are getting to the end game here. With Katita sleeping Leif floors the car with its torn back tyre down a fractured roadway with signs every twenty minutes indicating that this is the way to Newcastle. This is more countryside than outback now with woodland forest areas stretching for great distances beside the badly damaged road. The sun is fading and Katita is still fast asleep when strobing lights appear in the distance. They are still some distance away but it does not take long for Leif to discern that they are police lights. If they are coming for him what will he say. That he has medical supplies required in the city. Should he wake Katita up or just handle it himself. He checks for the pipe on the backseat in case he needs to take drastic action. Attacking police officers with a pipe would go down a treat no doubt.

Think back to the service station with the mechanic who is also the police officer from the city and the warning that he was given about being with Katita. The photos of him standing on a car and standing with Katita in a field from who knows how long ago. And to think that these are just a few bare memories he has with otherwise very little to refer to or contextualise anything that is happening to him other than a pulsating desire that rises from within him that tells him to follow Katita and do whatever is required here. With the sirens still approaching some five minutes in front of him Leif does not immediately notice that a policeman in an old truck has just revved up behind him and is honking the horn and waving to pull over. The policeman is from the town back where Katita bust up the boar versus robot scene. He walks up beside Leif and points a massive hand cannon at him and says in no uncertain terms to get out of the car.

As this is happening guess who else shows up. The police from down the road have caught up and parked in front of Leif and the rural officer. These guys are two military police officers from the city who leap out of their car and spot the hand cannon that the rural policeman is pointing at Leif. One of them says hey that is the gun that the guy with the bandages on his eyes had earlier. The rural officer asks what the hell they are talking about. That gun. One of the military officers swipes it out of the hands of the rural officer and says well done for confiscating it from this guy man oh man he and his girlfriend here have caused bloody havoc in the city. So do you have her sword. The rural officer is confused and agitated. Hey

arsehole hand my gun back. What are you talking about the city. He came through my town back there. What girl.

But the military officers are done talking. They are laying flat out on the ground. Katita is standing with a syringe in one hand and in the other she holds the massive hand cannon that used to belong to the rural officer. Before the rural officer can react he too hits the ground as Leif whacks him over the back of his head with the metal pipe from the car. Done with this scene our protagonists are back in their car with the pipe and the hand cannon as they head on down the roadway. The back tyre that was slashed by the farming machine earlier is now completely bald and parts of the car beneath the hood sound like they are rattling loose and causing all sorts of jerky mechanical shudders. When Leif sees further police lights approaching from the city in front of him as well as from the country town behind him he swings the car into a darkened wooded area away from the road.

The next section could be a novel in and of itself. Let me outline the main plot points here. Our protagonists find a farm storage cabin structure and go inside. Katita reminds Leif that they still need to get to the city with the medical supplies by morning. Hiding here is strategically fine but it does not preclude their goal of getting to the beach. Leif looks around the cabin to see if there is anything he can find to help fix up the car and get it back on the road. The cabin is well resourced in wood and leather working equipment but not so much for car maintenance. He thinks back to the photo of himself on some sort of cart. Of all the things he does not remember

he has a curious feeling that the blueprints to the construction of a wooden cart vehicle are already firmly in his mind. He asks Katita if she still has that rocket propulsion tool from earlier. She nods and reminds him that it is the last one they have so it needs to be used wisely.

And so they start on building a rocket cart. Leif tends to the construction of the vehicle while Katita spends time with the leather resources in order to make armour for them to wear. If they are indeed going to be able to travel in this cart all the way from here to the city then they are definitely going to need protective armour to keep them from getting seriously injured. As she starts to craft with the leather it is apparent that there will not be enough to stretch between the two of them. Leif makes Katita promise that she will make suitable armour for herself and not to worry about him. He will be fine.

Some hours later Leif finishes the cart and goes outside for some fresh air while Katita puts a few final touches on her armour. She looks behind an untouched pile of wood in the corner of the cabin and sees a large stash of leather and other associated resources. There is enough leather there to make a dozen full body suits of armour. Katita returns to working on the original single body of armour and calculates in her mind what will happen next in the same manner she makes herself do every single time this scene plays out. I could be explicit about the plot mechanics happening here with the eternal recurrence of the narrative playing over and over again in a loop of which we are here seeing but one instance of but I feel this

would be an insult to whatever sense of this you have created for yourself. Whatever you think is happening here probably is. Suffice to say that while Katita tries to force herself to go through the usual motions things are undeniably different this time around. She is undeniably different. Not just because of the comments from the baker about how old and tired she is looking but her reactions to many different things across the past day or two or however long this cycle has been. Katita reflects on how loyal Leif is to her and how much she is putting him through. He knows not what he does but his commitment is undoubtedly fueled by a love that she has fashioned in the most surgically strategic of ways. Again and again. Yesterday says love is always surgery.

From the moment he dove into the water to save that boy Katita has realised that Leif is her tool of change. When she mentioned earlier about the sound that the spine makes with its high resonance in contrast to the sound that the earth makes when it rubs against space with its low and nausea triggering groan she did not mention her theory that if the earth were to stop spinning in its regular direction and would instead be given cause to suddenly and spontaneously stop direction and turn in opposite revolutions that the sound caused by this screeching of orbital brakes would be very close if not identical to the high pitched resonance of the spine. Imagine a car shooting down the highway at a hundred and forty and then jamming its gears into reverse except rather than a car it is earth and rather than it being a highway it is the march of history. When Leif returns from getting fresh air from

the outside he does not see Katita finishing off the armour and telling him it is time to get the cart ready for take off. Instead when Leif walks in the front door of the cabin he sees Katita completely naked on the floor. Her red hair is a mop of fire as she embraces him into her and says hey Leif. How about you and me make a baby.

End of Chapter Five.

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This is the final chapter of A Complicated Surgery Will Take Place On The Beach Tonight. Leif and Katita nestle into each other in the afterglow on the floor of the cabin and start to fall asleep until a sound starts to reverberate overhead. Of course Katita immediately knows what it is. Those wings. She tells Leif that they need to leave immediately. For the mechanical seagull drone to be here flying overhead above them they must be very close to the city. Our protagonists get dressed and Leif goes to open the cabin door and wheel out the wooden cart but as he does so a pack of wild dogs burst in through the door with tongues lashing spit between their savage teeth that smash together in aim of Leif. He tries to push them out of the cabin by grabbing the trusty pipe and swinging it at them. As he pushes them back to the door Leif spots dozens of military officers heading through the darkened forest towards them. Not good. But then guess what happens next. All these people wearing animal masks run out from somewhere behind the cabin and block the

officers. These Dirtheart activists shout that this couple saved the pig tied to the robot. They should be celebrated not incarcerated. And then guess what happens. Oh man. A farmer in a mech costume walking beside an automaton wood chipper robot approaches from a nearby field. He yells out what are you all doing on my property.

So now you have a scene where there are rabid dogs gnashing their jaws at Leif with military police officers approaching through the trees with Dirtheart activists linking arms to stop them from proceeding while a farmer and his robot with its flailing blade appendages hack at trees and whatever else in its path and have I mentioned that the dogs when they bite and bark are looking up at Leif to the location on his back near his shoulders where he felt the immense pressure earlier. The pain is even worse now and it feels as though it is emitting its own high pitched squeal of some variety that the dogs must be responding to. In short everything is in absolute chaos and so everything is right with the world as far as Katita is concerned. Only Katita is acting with measured steps as she surreptitiously pushes the wooden cart with the box of medical supplies and rocket propulsion system out of the cabin whilst wearing the lone leather armour. See the cabin being torn to pieces by everybody involved here in an effort to get to Leif and Katita as they both slip away and onto the wooden cart and push it down a hill in a steep descent through trees and over treacherously positioned logs until bang. The cart hits a rock or whatever and flips over. Our protagonists press themselves to the ground in the dark of the forest beside their flipped cart in

the hope that they can avoid being found by the warring tribes they have just left behind.

From where Leif and Katita are laying on the ground they can turn towards a sudden declivity in the land where it drops off and runs all the way to the mouth of the city. The entrance to Newcastle where the forest and rural pasturelands transition to urban sprawl. Like the exact reverse of the transition from Newcastle to Maitland when I went to visit my wife on the train who at the time was just a redhead nursing intern who had jammed my world into a counterclockwise spin. All twenty metres of mechanical seagull wingspan are floating gently to and gradually fro above our two protagonists between the country and the city.

Say at this time as they are laying on the ground that Leif turns to Katita and asks her some pretty timely questions about all of this. I mean the whole situation. Perhaps he has memories that have returned from his time in the city and even memories from that time on the beach where he tried to save the boy in the waves and surely as he is pressed to the ground he must pat his pockets with a couple of free fingers and feel those photos from the drone earlier that he needs some clarification on before proceeding with whatever comes next. There are just so many questions for Leif and for us. What was it all about when he developed a heightened sense of vision where he was seeing multiple layers of reality at once all in conjunction with the high pitched frequency. And the impact that the low resonating droning tone had on Katita at the commencement of the book and the pathos about the

spinning of the world and the rubbing of earth against space and the sound the earth would make if it were suddenly reversed and then what if anything does this have to do with Leif and his back and the pressure he feels there. Yet even this would not begin to cover so many other critical queries that must surely be rising up within Leif as he can feel in this very moment right now that something about his existence is about to change. Something conclusive is about to happen for which he needs further justification and so he puts all of this into a single question. A single twelve word question that he has been meaning to ask this entire time. Guess how Katita answers him. She kisses him on the lips and covers her heart in a bandage so it cannot see what is going on and hence cannot cause her to break down.

The thing about keeping a bandage on a heart though is that it is difficult to keep it in place. Even though the heart pumps in fairly routine ways the asymmetry of the organ means it is near impossible to keep anything covering it for very long which is what happens to Katita as she pulls away from Leif. The bandage falls away from her heart and suddenly she is crying and removing her leather armour and wrapping it around Leif. He protests and asks what she is doing but she just keeps pushing it towards him. She is crying and she says I will go and get more. You stay here and protect the medicine and if I am not back by the time you see the sun start to rise than just head into the city without me.

Katita runs away into the shadows of the forest before Leif has half a chance to stand up and follow her.

While she is away there could be an opportunity for a stargaze internal monologue that Leif recites to himself in the dark of the forest beneath the flipped over wooden cart. A story one tells oneself for company in the absence of a light. The monologue would be disturbed part way through by the shouts of military officers calling out we found her there she is go and grab her or just shoot her dead. Spontaneous torch lights pierce through the trees and then there is gun fire with bullets ricocheting and splintering off branches followed by Katita who bolts across the pounding detritus and slides through a pile of leaves to land next to Leif. She says I am sorry I was stupid we need to go right now. Without having returned with anything Leif passes Katita the leather armour to put on as he flips the cart and readies the rocket propulsion to start firing up. Katita protests the armour but Leif insists and with the military only a handful of metres away they both take position on the wooden cart. Leif kneels at its front to weigh it down while Katita sits on her medicine box at its rear. She pulls the ignition on the rocket attachment and it burns like the sun as the cart shoots horizontal into the air and then down onto a gravel plain that leads straight to the city.

Now as you might imagine of a wooden cart that has just been hastily constructed from scrap materials in a cabin in the middle of the night with an experimental rocket propulsion system attached and a heavy box of medical supplies on its back is in say as valid roadworthy condition as a wheelchair that has just cascaded down a twelve story stairwell with a blindfolded gunman and a sword wielding nurse on top. That is to say it is a miracle

of physics that it is working at all and yet here they are already a couple of kilometres out of the forest with fading treelines behind them as they connect now to the main highway from the north straight into Newcastle. The more that the rocket system empties its fuel the more it increases its energy dump and propels the speed of the cart to the point that the front of the vehicle starts to lift from the ground. Leif tries to plant all of his weight down on the front and yet it just keeps rising and threatening to flip the entire cart over if it gets any more vertical. Katita has her eyes focused on Leif as if a physical string were connecting her line of sight directly to him. She does not waver and look anywhere else but straight to him and his every move. When Leif reaches around to see if there is anything else he can use to weigh the cart down Katita passes him the pipe that they have hung onto this entire time since the mechanic gave it to them at the service station in Chapter Four. Suddenly Leif remembers the photograph from the drone that showed him standing on top of a cart just like this one. He gets the pipe and wedges it between two wooden bars to form a kind of roll cage.

The cart is hurtling along the roadway even faster now as entropy is taking full rage within the rocket fuel as it nears its heat death and expires completely. Leif tries to pull down on the pipe to steady the vehicle but he knows from the photograph what he really needs to do and so he climbs up onto the horizontal pipe and through raw determination he commands himself to balance on top of it like a bird on a swing. With his full weight on the front of the cart from this position it feels as though the balance of

the vehicle is corrected for maybe half a second before it continues to pull up at the front and become ever more vertical. They are actually in Newcastle now and rolling through its outer streets that are just beginning to wake for the morning as the sun crests its head just above the horizon behind the central quarters of the city and of course above the bend of the eternal beach. With the last drop of fuel within the rocket canister it explodes its final push as Katita stares up at Leif and sees what she has been waiting for since the very beginning.

Two pure white wings all bright and pulsating like phosphorus and birth light begin to push out from the back of Leif. From his shoulders. They unfurl and hold court against the wind in a state of suspended animation that depending on the viewer might appear as if this event lasts for an entire lifetime. For Katita it seems as though on either side of this moment there are infinite stretches of darkness which are proportionate to how bright these wings glow in the morning light. As the cart lifts into its final vertical stand Leif rises up into the air with all the gentle grace of a wish cast out on the kind of breath that every birthday candle and seed head of a dandelion were created to receive as he flaps his wings and soars.

For the first time in the past twenty thousand words and for the first time in the fifteen years I have been tinkering with this plot we see Katita laughing. Actually laughing with the full beam of her face turned all the way up into complete elation as she cries with joy and blinks through her tears to see Leif and his wings shine ever

brighter before it comes to an end which it absolutely and violently does.

No sooner has Katita cried yes when she reverses every emotion and screams out a desperately inevitable

no

as Leif tumbles to the ground and exerts the most horrible plundering sound of wheezing and anguish as his body disfigures along the ground behind the cart which itself now ploughs into the concrete wall of a car park. The pipe on top of the cart takes the brunt of the impact as it compacts against the concrete and becomes a thin silver wedge that because of the heat generated at the moment of collision has rendered both sides of the wedge now to be a sort of blade.

Katita is lying on the ground. The leather armour has done its job in protecting her. She looks at her hands and they cannot stop shaking. All she wants to do is cover her eyes and block out the reality of what has just happened and yet because her hands cannot sit still they keep on letting the light in. Leif is splayed out on the ground in an unconscious and beaten up state. Katita knows his condition before she walks over because he is always the same at this point in the story. She stands up and walks over to the medical box on the back of the wooden cart. From the box she takes out some bandages and an external pacemaker and a folded wheelchair. She opens up the wheelchair and rolls it over beside Leif.

Before she dresses him up in his old Hawaiian shirt pulled from beneath the wheelchair she inspects his back one more time. Always the same. There are no signs of wings or of anything ever having been there. His back is as it was before except now it is bruised and cut up from the gravel he has just slid across. Perhaps the wings came from beneath the bruises. It is hard to tell now. Maybe there is a sign there. When she stirred up dust on the floor of the shopping centre when they went to sleep that first night and she philosophised about how all truth could be located within the falling specks which is to say that all truth is a fiction of language games. How does this apply here. What answer would make her feel better. She goes back to the cart and takes the now pristinely folded and heat sharpened blade that the pipe has been pressed into and she wraps a bandage around its base for grip. You cannot do surgery without a sword. Before Katita places bandages on Leif so his eyes will stay closed until the following evening she kisses him on the cheek and says I am so sorry for what you are about to go through but it is the whole reason we are here. She says we need to break the cycle. We can do it we can do it we can do it we.

The ocean is crashing down in salty laps just down the street from where they have collapsed. Katita lifts Leif into the wheelchair and places in his hand the hand cannon she stole from the rural policeman. We might imagine what she is thinking given the trajectory of things to come as she tells herself that a complicated surgery will take place on the beach tonight but whatever we are telling

ourselves is probably just an old out of date rumination that we have not outlearned since we first formed a view about what all of this means.

For me this was about fifteen years of life during the gaps. The times that I would look away from what was in front of me and turn to this as a concentrated form of blinking. What can I tell you about the past. I can tell you that at the beginning I met a redhead medical intern who replaced the previous set of directions I had in my head with new ones that were handwritten with stardust. Perhaps I have had an impact on her as well but sometimes it is difficult to tell. We learned how to live together and we learned the best sequence of lights and colours and sounds and gradients of tactile feedback to stimulate just the right sort of emotional stew that we could feast on together. We have called this our life and it has been good. In the yard we planted a garden and from time to time we shouted in the street and in the spare room we created our own electronic mail addresses and now we have a baby on the way. I expect the map in my head to be rewritten anew in six weeks time when I come face to face with our child and I can only hope that my head will provide me with directions for how I might empty more of what is inside of it out into the world in a way that reveals something of the life I have lived during the tens of thousands of hours of time by myself looking at walls and at footpaths and during extended periods of blinking. Perhaps in time I will even tell my child about what happened to me over in Shanbudia unless they read it here first.

The morning following my tectonic eruption over dinner in Shanbudia was the commencement of my final day in the country. After taking a shower and considering my modesty before the glass windows that buffered me from the vast desert world of Shanbudia I recall how for each of the six mornings I stood and looked out like this I was never anything less than completely awestruck by just how foreign this view was to anything I had ever seen before. Beyond the immediate motorways and apartment buildings copy and pasted ad infinitum as simulacra of the life to come that stretched deep into the distance there was a surrounding kingdom of sand that blanketed every patch of vision otherwise void of construction. In the middle of each night I would wake and look from my balcony out to the horizon and would see small handfuls of light bleeding at positions I understood belonged to the cities of neighbouring countries. During the day it was impossible to see these distant cities as the glare from the sky had a way of smudging all details into one broad expanse of light that erased definition beyond the hotel.

I would be surprised if there had been more than one single thought in my head on that final morning when I got dressed and walked out of the apartment. The night before was definitely not in my head. That came later. The only conscious intention I had that morning was to walk in a spirit of blank minded meandering and so I walked

through the hotel from the twelfth floor down to the ground and out to the driveway where palm trees formed a turning bay beside a large white sculpture that looked like a solar flare rendered in concrete. Previous mornings when I stepped out there were a dozen pale saffron taxi vehicles parked and waiting for passengers and yet this morning they are not here. Not only that but the hotel employees that usually stand out here and welcome new visitors to the hotel and farewell those leaving are not present either. Come to think of it there was nobody in the lobby this morning either. From the pool area through the breakfast dining room and the lobby and onto the driveway the hotel was as silent as it was humid which is to say that it had as much commotion as morning traffic on the moon.

At the bottom of the hotel driveway a single road splits into what appears as a hundred different exit routes that wind into onramps and causeways. They extend across fountain soaked pikes and disappear into shopping centre car parks and other temples of synthesised nature with the most extraordinary interiors that replicate snow covered ski slopes and underwater aquariums filled with manta rays and exotic fish and even sharks that must be very well fed or at least sedated in some manner as they do not give the usual victims in the tank a second look. In less than ten hours I will be boarding my flight home. Perhaps I should walk to the airport from here. It would take at least a twenty minute hike along the main highway before you get off the strip and into any sort of neighbourhood or change of scenery. Fortunately there are no cars on the road this

morning so I am not only at no risk of being knocked by speeding traffic but I am also allowed the rare freedom of walking on the highway itself. Typically this is in no way a city to be walked. At first I stick to the lane of ongoing traffic but as I keep looking back to sight any approaching cars and see nothing but empty space I eventually move into the very middle of the highway. There is no barricade dividing the traffic traveling south from the traffic traveling north so I literally am able to walk up the middle of the highway with one foot in the lane traveling south and one foot in the lane traveling north.

I can see that around two kilometres down the road an exit ramp turns left and then swings into a bridge that crosses the highway and heads towards what appears as a miniature city from this distance and is from what I can make out one of the nearest populated areas to walk to. Certainly there are some businesses dotted along the sides of the highway such as self storage warehouses and car yards and industrial sales supplies but like the road they are all void of activity this morning and even if they were not I had no interest in surveying sites of that nature. As much as I do love the efficient anonymity of industrial business areas and the grand barcode highways that roll up to and past them like some heavy concrete tongue depressors holding down whatever antique strips of nature are saying ahh beneath them it is not this sort of experience I am seeking but rather I want the more intimately rapid navigation of laneways and stairwells in order to participate in as much antigeometry as urbanism can

perform. My only real question at this distance is whether I slowly veer left and walk onto the exit ramp proceeding to then cross the bridge and into the city or whether I can simply veer right and head up what appears as a sandy embankment that will then take me to the same position the bridge connects to. I have twenty minutes of empty highway wandering to decide on the best course of action with still no sign of any cars either in the lane of my left foot or of my right.

A couple of months ago I was considering a career change and decided to play with the idea of creating a specialised therapy service that teaches people how to create games inside of their heads. Specifically games that people can activate behind their eyes in order to cultivate boredom in very self reliant ways. Walking down this highway in Shanbudia gives me a sweeping period of time to further refine a couple of potential game ideas. The first game is simple enough. You need to remember a moment from your past. The catch is that you are not allowed to use any external prompting to do so hence no looking through photo albums or social media feeds. Rather the idea is to just reach back into your past with either your eyes open or closed and just chance upon a memory that you have not thought about for some time. The process of doing this is quite profound particularly if you try to avoid the regular memories you always go back to. I have been attempting at least once a day to reach back as far as I can in my memories to recall a moment and then the following day I try to recall a moment just slightly more recent than that

one until perhaps I will have remembered all the way back to the present day.

Here is the earliest memory that I can give shape and language to. I am a young lad of perhaps two or three years old and I am sitting on a swing in a park. The park is one filled with very tall gum trees and I am covered in shadows. I know this because I am seeing myself both through my own eyes but also from the perspective of someone looking at me from a few metres in front of where I am swinging. Perhaps this is why it is my first real memory because it is the moment that I first saw myself from two positions at once and hence created an analogy. My sense of self was created when I compared my own perspective with the perspective of someone looking back at me. The swing I was on had a blue plastic horse head at its front and it is this that I am holding onto. I can still feel the plastic and the hollow space within the head of the horse like a barrel drum. It is possible I tapped it a few times to hear the resonance within. My body feels like a round marshmallow as I am wearing a thick blue jumper and a fluffy blue beanie which may have been because it was Winter or perhaps my mother dressed me like this to counteract any potential cold cast by the shade and the shadows. I feel as though my mother and father are very close to me but I cannot see them in my memory. Rather I see a road in front of me with a log fence dividing the park from the roadway. If anyone were driving past and looked over at me they would have seen a little boy shaped like a round blue marshmallow sitting on a horse swing beside

his family and they would have perhaps glimpsed my big broad rosy cheeked smile that I can still feel and which fills me with such a strong muscle memory around my mouth that it seems to me that all subsequent smiles I have had in my life were learned as a direct result of the smile I had on the swing that day. It trained my face to know what an unreserved projection of happiness looks like to others. I think this is another reason I can see myself on the swing in my memory. The reason the chemicals in my head chose this moment to remain and be conjured up some thirty three years later. It is the moment that I first consciously smiled.

Further down the highway I decide to veer right and climb up the sandy embankment with a roadway at its peak that leads a further kilometre forward before the city proper emerges. It starts out as most cities do with long concrete walls graffitied in linguistic bloom that speak to the economic intentions within. In Capeto the language on the outskirts is a fusion of love hearts and barb wire. Beijing has circuit boards and fireworks. In this satellite city of Shanbudia the language is a fusion of skyscrapers and the faces of its political leaders and a hooded peregrine beneath the desert sun. At the end of the wall a neighbourhood of two and three storey businesses start to fold out of the ground like buildings in a popup dictionary for children. I walk past a diabetes health clinic and a telescope resource centre with a photography studio above it and there is a plastics supplier and a tile showroom and another health clinic that might be for physiotherapy and I

think about something I often consider when walking past two and three story buildings such as these which is how I might climb onto their rooftops. I think it is a reasonable thing to want to get as physically elevated as possible when in a new area in order to scope out a general sense of more or less interesting directions to wander in. Of course this is sometimes more or less easy to achieve depending on the circumstances. More easy to achieve when taking an elevator up to the high floor of a building with public access and less easy to achieve when confronted with buildings like these with no obvious entry points.

Here is another game that can be played inside the head. You pretend that every other person in the world has disappeared except for you and that this is a temporary occurrence that lasts for say twenty four hours. You then filter your experience of whatever geographic space you are in through this knowledge that you are the only person left on earth. This is when you think seriously about how you would climb up the side of a building to get to its rooftop in order to scope out the city and find the best place to secure food and the best place to bathe in a river perhaps depending on whether you imagine services like water and electricity are still functioning. You can develop fantasies about walking into peoples homes in the evening when it is dark and sleeping on their beds or perhaps if that is too unsettling you might look around for safe parkland to retire to. I highly recommend playing this game if you are walking around a city by yourself. You will look at a cinema and think about walking in and taking a seat

anywhere you like and perhaps you might look up at the silver screen and project a few of your memories onto it from when you were still living amongst people. At times I have thought about recording some guided meditations that help walk through some of the ways you might navigate an empty world. I could call them Empty World Meditations and talk in that second person perspective that guided yoga tapes sometimes follow such as You are walking down the middle of a highway with one foot in the lane traveling south and one foot in the lane traveling north and you see a city in the distance that you head towards. You notice the sun in the bleached sky is very high and it will be many hours yet until it sets. The feeling of having a target in view to walk towards across a great peopleless distance fills you with deep calm. Because you feel so relaxed you consider sleeping in the middle of the empty highway. This is not a bad idea. Turn the tape over.

I have walked beyond midday and into the afternoon by this stage and the heat across Shanbudia has not lessened by one drop of sunlight. It is intense and yet I feel like I am starting to pass through the feeling of being too hot into an embracing of whatever levels of heat might still be coming my way. Amor fati. I want to sweat and get as hot as possible and then head to the beach for a swim before drying off and heading to the hotel and the airport. There is almost certainly a section of beach around here somewhere although thinking back to Katita and Leif perhaps I do not know fully the journey in front of me. I see a building some handful of kilometres away that looks

remarkably like the conference centre I have been speaking in this week. From the perspective I am looking at it from down this roadway I am sure there must be particular geometries to the building that can be resolved by way of climbing up its domed roof. From the roof I should be able to absorb an unsettling amount of heat in service of looking out towards wherever the coastline is to plot my walking path accordingly.

When I think about what I planned for *A Complicated Surgery Will Take Place On The Beach Tonight* it strikes me as a point of internal conflict that I would choose for the story to have only two focal characters at the exclusion of the rest of the world. So many nights I dream about just my wife and I being the only two people alive in the world. I imagine us walking across fields off to the side of some abandoned superhighway and I visualise us as seen from clouds high above as two small toy people walking across a vast kingdom of dirt. In this world instead of its antithesis the sky sets before the sun. There are not even other animals in the vicinity except perhaps some bugs dancing atop dew covered florets as we press on through across our empty and mostly silent world.

But perhaps this is not the full seed of my fantasies. Am I not always imagining a threatening force somewhere out there in the world that is closing in on us that forces our constant escape. The reason we left our car in the middle of the road and started our trek across the field is surely to lose track of whatever is chasing us even

if the antecedent for this fear does not exist. I wonder if this is really the best story I can come up with. Surely a more mature version of this fantasy would be for it to include a cast of say three thousand other characters who all have names and unique personalities and intentions that contribute to a symphony of overlapping worlds and histories and layers of reality like a religious text perhaps or some convoluted theoretical map connecting all television series together into a single narrative. If I ever find a way to finish and move beyond *A Complicated Surgery Will Take Place On The Beach Tonight* this is what I want to work towards. To wake up from my teenage dreams and realise the stories that keep us alive beyond two lovers holding hands in escape across a world void of other minds and possibly void of our own.

The concluding resolution of the conference workshop inside the dome yesterday morning was that if children live amongst technological nature this is better than if they live with no nature at all although this is to be sure not quite as good as if they were living with real nature. And so city planners are going to investigate whether broad liquid crystal displays can be placed on the walls of car parks to display swatches of colours including lawngreen hex code 7CFC00 and chartreuse hex code 7FFF00 and mediumspringgreen hex code 00FA9A that can stimulate the sort of wellbeing that walking across a paddock might otherwise provide. Changi airport in Singapore has beautiful butterfly enclosures within the terminal through the windows of which you can see the jet

fuel of the planes ripple on the tarmac outside for this very reason. I spent a long night walking around Changi airport a couple of years ago that I still think about often. Walking around the airport was one of the first times I blended physical exhaustion with a forward moving momentum where I refused to sit down until I was on board the plane which in retrospect was a near perfect mirroring of what would be this final day in Shanbudia except to say that my time in Singapore was not marked by the same level of incident that my previous night has given rise to. Back to the workshop and my final recommendation to the participants was that we should provide all children with sledgehammers and wood and nails and flint for building and burning the city in equal measure and that we would do well to also provide telescopes and microscopes and some additional sledgehammers. You can never have too many sledgehammers. One of the town planners asked where they could download this augmented reality application to their smartphone and I replied it was not yet available but might be one day soon.

Presently I arrive at the base of the conference centre or at least it is a very similar looking dome. It looks like where we all arrived after we were dropped off by the taxi but then I do not remember any of these streets I have been passing through on the way here. There is nobody here outside the conference centre to ask and I do not recognise the language written on the front which is to say that I have not learned a single character of the language while I have been over here so every word is still as

indecipherable as the next. It does not really matter if it was the same building or not as my purpose for walking the dusty kilometres here is to get high and absorb the intense midday heat while I look out towards the coast and dream about plunging into the water. There is a utility ladder that steps from the car park of the conference centre up along the curve of the dome and beyond a safety fence that I will need to climb. The ladder then proceeds to wrap around the top of the dome until it reaches what looks like a grilled platform at the apogee. So long as the ladder and the platform are not unbearable to touch this is my plan for the next thirty minutes.

As I climb the ladder I come up with another game for the inside of a head. Visual deconstruction. To play this game you select one element of the environment around you and name it. For example perhaps the element of selection might be roads or it might be trees or it might be car parks or anything you choose to consider. The next step is to then subtract this element from the world so if you selected roads as your element of choice you would then visualise what the world looks like without the existence of roads. This might mean seeing a cityscape in which instead of roads there are instead deep trenches where the roads used to be so that people need to be careful when they walk on the footpath lest they fall into the depths. Or perhaps you might create an alternative scenario in which the areas formerly constructed as roads are now green carpeted corridors of grass that flow through avenues between blocks of the city. I sometimes imagine

what the world would look like without the existence of wind. From my desk where I am writing these words I can look out through the window at tea trees and kangaroo paws and lavender bushes and imagine what they would look like if the shifting of air were not constantly giving them cause to move. Because consider that if even the smallest movement from plants produced a sound like the bowing of a string then even on these apparently breeze free days the yard would still produce a cacophony of noise as there is never not an instance in which the plants are not in a constant state of global vibration. Subtraction here would equal silence. At this point my thoughts immediately go to my late friend Les and I half wonder what he would have chosen to subtract from the world.

One morning some years ago when I was riding my bike through Newcastle I ended up on the artificial breakwall at the end of the city where the ocean takes over. There is a lighthouse and a long stretch of ground that casts out from the headland to another smaller tower with a guiding light to indicate distance from land and depth of sea to incoming container and coal ships heading to the loader on the other side of the harbour. Surrounding this breakwall are many concrete cubes the size of buses that buffer the ground in order to keep everything in place. On this particular morning when I rode out the sun was not dissimilar to how it is today in Shanbudia in what must have been the height of our Summer. With an intention to take a break and recline beside the ocean and soak up the sun and breathe in a meditative fashion I set my bike down

on the break wall and climbed up on one of the concrete cubes that was leaning at a sharp angle and I lay down on one of the sky facing surfaces with my entire body pressed flat against the concrete. The moment I reclined back I immediately realised I would never be able to stand up again. My whole body was glued to the cube in fear of moving and falling off into the crashing waves of the ocean below me. It was a ridiculous act to have gone so far out from the shore on this breakwall meant for the guiding of ships. With my arms out wide and my head trying desperately to lift itself off the block in order to coordinate my next movements all I could think about was pushing myself up and immediately spiraling into an unavoidable fall of vertigo that would throw my body into the ocean never to be seen again. I would be like Icarus tumbling to his death into the Mediterranean on a beautiful day as a mule pulls a plough driven by a neatly dressed and completely oblivious ploughman. Now as I am nearly halfway up this conference centre dome with an intention of pressing my body to the top of it in a foreign city some fourteen hours sky travel from Australia I wonder if I have ever really learned anything from experience or whether I am merely a read only witness.

Our ability to learn from experience and solve problems is something that I have often profoundly misunderstood with regards to what it is to be human. These days I would like it to be more frequently stated that the world we have built around us is the result of what we could do given our present and historical human capacity.

In other words this is not the absolute best of all possible versions of reality. If our human capacity was different we would have done things differently. Take an invention like the car which was the result of a great many collectives of people pushing against the uppermost limits of their ingenuity and mastery over broad domains of human knowledge to conceptualise the function of roads connecting towns and the iterative evolution of horse and cart and bicycle all the way up to one cylinder two stroke ladies and gentlemen start your engines. Because we see cars everywhere they feel like a natural and inevitable part of our human creativity and for the most part I think that is true. It likely was inevitable we ended up with cars and roads because that is what the limit of our human capacity could achieve by looking out at the world with the eyes we have and the manner in which we process sensory information and decode cause and effect to construct systems of physics and economics and all the rest.

But say our capacities were different. Say our sensory processing and cognition was significantly different to what we have now and so we interpreted the world in different ways. Without even straying too far into fantasy just imagine our cognitive capacity was overall far greater than we have ever historically had. What if our foresight told us that we would be committing a grossly ill considered act to invent transport methods like cars that burn the chemical remains of dead fauna let alone constructing roads that forever cut through forests and waterways. Rather our heightened capacities might guide

us to generate resources and to adapt our language into positions that do not require any systems of transport or at the very least something far less damaging. Something that does not involve putting humans in molded plastic boxes that can hurtle down the road at extraordinary speeds towards other boxes.

Perhaps we would see a sensory spectrum of dimensions beyond the ones we can test for now that would create systems of logic that operate on a completely different plane to what we currently know as logic. Again this might sound like a thought experiment but what about technologies we have created over time that have taken our capacities prior to the invention to new levels afterwards. With innovations like computer linkups that synchronise with the brain who is to say that the standard deviations for average human capacity will not be completely reformulated in the next couple of decades. Depending on individual economic capacities of course.

Our current human capacity and the achievements we have as a result of it speak nothing to an absolute truth of what it is to be human and to achieve human things. It simply speaks to what the presently average capacity is of what it is to be human as determined by diagnostic tools created to establish a statistically average humanity by those individuals within a statistically average range. It would be a mistake to recognise this as absolutely what it is to be human anymore than it would be to say that when we connect ourselves to computers this would make us any more or less correct in our experience of what it is to be

human just as it would be a mistake to consider a cognitively average experience of what it is to be human as any more or less correct than those with cognitive abilities assessed to be statistically within the the profoundly low range. There is no version of humanity or cognitive capacity that is more correct or suitable than any other. We create the world in our own image which is a very constraining activity. Nature is perfect but nurture is not.

I am now on the very top of the conference centre and for the past how ever many minutes the composition of sweat pouring down my head has progressed from individually packaged droplets sliding down my cheeks and my neck to a full helmet of sweat that is streaming relentlessly into my shirt. At this point I am beyond the revelatory state of powerlessness that a sauna gives rise to and rather feel I am approaching a dream state where I cannot process the surface of the dome beneath me. Whether that is because my temperature sensors are not registering the metal of the conference centre because it has overwhelmed me or whether it is because I am beginning to lose consciousness is a matter for historic analysis but whatever is happening to me feels above all else like a necessary purging of the memories that are inside of my head as each stream of sweat feels as though it is carrying within it the data of what all morning I have been trying to remember. Say the water contains all my remembrances of things past in sliding photos that wave as they flow down from my brain down my body and to the curved roof of the conference centre as my memories

cascade down the dome and into the empty streets below like a sun shower of recollections that dissipate into sweet nothing. My head feels as though it is gradually emptying and all I can think to do is take out my phone on five percent battery and do a search for how many photos can a droplet of water hold which results in zero responses so I search for how many megabytes of memory can you store in a litre of liquid which again results in zero responses and a four percent battery level which is when I realise I have zero internet connection so nothing is being searched.

I turn the phone to camera mode instead and aim it at the staggering sunset having commenced over the beach some couple of kilometres away. There is a hotel out there curved like a leaf and it sits like a virtual ruler to measure the incremental changes to the colour gradient of the sky as it melts from high violet through apricot and a soft splitting of tones that run from cherry blonde to a lashing of the red hair of my wife as she reclines atop the ocean like some landscape fertility goddess and her hair becomes darkened now as it laps beneath the waves and into the shadows of the buildings that span the walk between here and there. Perhaps I do not need to walk to the beach perhaps I can leap from this rooftop and just float all the way down to the water.

I look at the beach and the sunset and the expanse of the world here unblemished by another living soul except perhaps for the body of my wife forming the pregnant coastline out to sea and my head is nearly expired of all words as I rely on the meat beneath my shoulders to

deliver me in a waterfall of recirculation on and on and.

Let me get a bit philosophical here for a moment just to project for you the sort of revelations that were going through my head at this point. What started out as a few thoughts that interrupted my otherwise unfettered march forward through empty sun drenched streets towards the top of this dome whereby I had been considering the recall of memories without photos and a world without wind and our humble capacities and then just as the last thoughts fell out of my head on the back of my last words I considered the following and then I did not consider anything again until I woke up in Australia. Regardless of how retroactively coherent this might sound now let me try and capture whatever content of those last words that I can.

I remember thinking about the silent poetry of language games and the choices we make which is to say for just a moment consider with me if there exists a foundational truth at the centre of the universe upon which all of reality is positioned. Now in considering how this truth might be rendered for human comprehension we might give thought as to the accessibility of this comprehension. Would this truth be comprehensible only by those with a particular number of years of philosophical study up their sleeve say by those who are well read in analytic and evolutionary psychology and quantum physics say within a particular intellectual range by those with a particular grasp on language and by those who can recite back a comprehension of the truth in a speech that lasts no

more than a couple of minutes to sufficiently authenticate that comprehension. Or might we rather suggest that if there exists a foundational truth at the center of the universe upon which all of reality is positioned then it must be accessible to everybody regardless of cognitive capacity or strength of attention or training or language and as such it would be an inclusive truth. One that is democratically and phenomenologically within reach of all humans who would care to engage with it. And as such might it rather be acknowledged that any sound that this truth might appear to be making at the center of the universe is rather actually a sound that is echoing and rising up from the center of yourself. I have said this before. Perhaps that sound is a breath. Perhaps it is not.

Let us start every morning and every meeting and conversation with the following epistemological acknowledgement. Good morning. Let us acknowledge that we have the capacity for language to tell stories that might help us live but that language can only ever talk about language. Language is a game of fictions and model making built to slide around inside the puzzle box of our dialogues and there are no prizes for correctly arranging the pieces because there is no correct way to arrange them. Language cannot escape the fiction of its form because fiction is its only form. Truth is a language game. If fiction is all there is then this does not mean that everything is also truth. It means that language can only ever talk about language. And all language sounds like a breath rising up from nothing.

Perhaps too we should follow this daily epistemological acknowledgement with an ethical acknowledgement that we are forever looking out of a pinprick within a keyhole at the consequence of ourselves. We only ever have access to part of the data and part of the history and part of the universe and part of the language. When we look at the ecosystem on the mountain and the dwindling supplies of flora and fauna and the disrupted balance in play we might be caused to consider technical solutions and the research of experts and the diagnostic tools of advanced machine learning. And when we go ahead and implement our solution it may surprise us when things get worse or better or stay the same because the mountain and its history and its future are bigger than the pinprick within the keyhole can give us vantage of. On the one hand sure reality is just a language game and the consequences are moot. But on the other hand your child is coughing and it does not sound good. Language can only ever talk about language and the most ethical thing you can do is not stretch yourself too far into predictive models of the future. Those models are pinprick fictions. Just try to choose the path of least harm. And if an expert wants to give their advice and tell you about the foundational truth at the center of the universe upon which all of reality is positioned tell them the keyhole is accessible to you as much as to them. With or without language. Rising from the center of yourself. Breathe in and then do the opposite.

By this stage I am already halfway down the ladder on the other side of the dome. I know how to get to

the beach from here. It is a curious thing that before I flew over to Shanbudia I posted a question on an Internet forum for locals of Shanbudia asking how easy it was to talk across the city. Not that I anticipated this walk necessarily but I had seen a few local landmarks and places to do a little shopping and wondered if I could walk there or would rather need to catch a taxi or the train. The answer that was resoundingly echoed across the forum was that this is definitely not a walking city. It is desert and motorways I was told and you will either be hit by a car as you walk on the side of the road or you will wander into the sand and never be recovered. For the most part this felt true up until this morning. I would never have chanced walking to the conference centre on the previous mornings. My colleagues and I all piled into taxis that drove us across town through the grid of morning traffic and brought us back to the hotel the same way afterwards. Certainly from my verandah the desert did look so vast and foreboding that any stray from the main thoroughfare would no doubt result in becoming hopelessly lost.

But today is different. Today the roads are quiet and the opportunity to walk down the middle of them can not be passed up and as for the desert it just feels so far away. Sure even the newest buildings around here look sandblasted to the point of appearing as archeological ruin with massive holes punched through the middle of otherwise miraculous displays of antigravity engineering and yet all of this is moot compared with the pending ocean in the foreground moving ever closer to my

footfalls. As the light around the city quickly descends the sound of the beach becomes louder and more clear and everything I need it to be.

On the west side of the road there is a brightly coloured surf shack with a few tables and chairs out front. Its doors are wide open and out of the sort of curiosity that piques when you know you may never return to a street again I poke my head inside to take a look around. It is more spacious inside than the outside suggests. There is a cash register with a cabinet of sunglasses and a few bottles of juice and iced tea and two large yellow melons that look like big mangoes but are larger than any I have seen before. On the right wall a row of a dozen surf boards stand beneath a gallery of photographs of surfers riding waves and holding trophies. There are lights illuminating the store that look like table legs with light bulbs in the end of them hanging from the roof in a scattered layout.

Curiously or perhaps by now to be expected there are no people here. Since leaving the hotel this morning I have not seen a single person anywhere. I would not have climbed the roof of the conference centre had there been anybody around and yet it is what it is. In a foreign country I climbed up and down the outside of a public building in broad daylight. I started to think perhaps it was a public holiday that I had not been told about and everybody was at home or in a religious setting for the day. This just further cemented the strange feeling the whole day held where I felt like I was in a virtual reality experience or perhaps more accurately like a real virtualisation of this

very world atom for atom within which I could do anything I wanted. Walk down the middle of the road and climb public domes and walk through doorways free of consequence. No responsibilities. I had been feeling particularly relaxed all day but it was just really starting to solidify in my mind just how at ease I felt walking around this city. Perhaps even more so than the day I took off from work back in Newcastle when I first discovered what it did for me to not reveal my position to anybody and just let the gravity of falling forward in a strolled momentum take me inward.

It is barely two hundred metres to the beach from the surf shack. I cross a street and walk through a dusty parking lot in the dark and then my feet take on that familiar descension of body into sand. The whole point of walking to the beach at least on a surface level was to dip into the water and wash off the heat of the day. It is still phenomenally humid even on sunset to the point where my eyes feel like they keep fogging up when I stare without blinking for too long. And yet now I am here at the beach I do not want to swim. My flight leaves at around half past eleven and sunset has been happening at around seven so I still likely have an hour or two before I need to leave for the airport. The sun is a flat disk made of visibly textured layers as if strips of coloured paper from blood red to molten gold have been glued next to each other to form a quite natural looking spectrum. So perfect is the scene that it cannot help but look manufactured in some way. The sky is a chalk dusted purple sinking into architecture and

scenery that gain a beautiful sense of loss with every passing second as details become void. And then carrying in from somewhere nearby there is a detail that feels like an impossibility in an otherwise empty world. I hear music. Trying to trace its origins I turn back towards the surf shack but it is definitely not coming from that direction. It sounds as though it is coming from directly in front of me. From across the water.

As I take further steps through the sand towards the edge of the water I come against a surface beneath my feet that is not sand. It feels like solid concrete. When I look closer at the ground and where it leads to I nearly fall backwards as I realise that a hotel of at least sixty storeys is looming over me. It is nearly completely engulfed in shadow of the same contrast as the water which is why I had not seen it before. All of the lights in and on the building are switched off which makes me think it might not be a functioning hotel yet but rather still under construction like so much of the architecture around here. Against the last drips of the sun I can see the hotel is broadly leaf shaped. I realise now I saw it from the top of the conference centre earlier this afternoon.

There is no doubting now the source of the music. Even though all the lights are off there definitely appears to be music in there. For a moment I think about turning back to walk towards a taxi rank just in case I find it hard to hail one and get to the airport in time and yet I cannot turn away from this music. A whole day of walking and finally a sign of life in this city. Perhaps it would be more

poetic to walk away though. To not investigate. My whole reason for walking was just to walk and not engage. Again this thought lasts for only a moment before I feel myself falling towards the hotel.

It is a toss up as to whether I am drawing upon a hidden source of bravery within me in order to walk through the rotating glass doors of this entirely dark hotel or whether I am being exclusively carried along by the four to the floor dance beat on a wave of creative inspiration or perhaps and on reflection surely the accurate answer that I am simply so exhausted that absolutely everything seems like a good idea. I am the virtual in the reality.

The tiles of the hotel foyer are so smooth that I would have fallen multiple times already had it not been for the grains of sand gripping the soles of my shoes and providing traction as I make my way through a maze of pillars that in the dark I nearly keep running into. When I come against the pillars they feel as though they are carved in wave formations incorporating the bodies of fish or at least the fanning tails of great fish splashing in a moment of suspended animation. The music is reverberating across the tiles with a heartbeat pulse and a scattershot of high hats and perhaps trumpet melodies echoing across the beat. It is high energy dance music to be sure and I find a ramp at the other side of the foyer that appears to lead into what could be the source of the tunes. Through a heavy curtain I push into another completely shadowed room and this is absolutely where the music is coming from.

The entire room is filled with this pulsating beat that throbs and causes the air around my head to contract and expand like a fist squeezing the room from the outside and causing it to press against me with each bass drum kick repeating in loops which could be a half second apart or it could be minutes between when the next beat pounds forward. Sometimes it sounds like there is no sound at all as if one track has been turned off and the other is still being decided upon and yet when I try to focus on these moments I have trouble remembering what silence should sound like. Even when I think a beat has not landed for a few seconds I can discern a low roar in its absence. A drone many octaves down that resonates and rumbles the entire dance floor and sounds like it is getting louder with every gap between kicks.

As with so many moments across this day my mind only realises what my body has been doing some time after it has already commenced. I stare at my arms and legs unseeable in this darkness and realise through the forces against my joints that I am dancing. My arms are like spaghetti waving through the air and my legs are like a toddler swaying to maintain its first attempt at an upright position. I throw my head back and close my eyes against the void of the room and just let myself be taken by the sound. When I open my eyes in anticipation of the same darkness as beneath my eyelids I instead see something that had I not seen it I would have never written about this day in Shanbudia at all. You must believe me that when I opened my eyes the entire room was filled with light. Not

in a religious sense but rather I mean the room was firing laser lights against disco balls spinning from the ceiling while massive stage lights beamed onto the dance floor to illuminate every face of the thousands of people dancing around me. The lights strobe off for a second and everybody disappears again and yet it only takes the next bass drop to pound the air again and the lights have strobed back on again revealing everybody dancing. I can see all of their faces so clearly. Everybody in the world is here. My colleagues from the conference and from my eruption last night. The government ministers and town planners who attended my workshop and the hotel employees finished guiding the taxi rank for the day. But more than this too. Everybody I have ever seen and not seen. Faces unfamiliar that I just want to run up and embrace and press my tears against. The lights strobe off and I wipe my eyes and hold out my arms to try and feel somebody nearby and then the lights come on again and everybody returns. If I pressed deep enough into the crowd I would no doubt find my wife here and why not perhaps a future version of our baby already grown up in all variations of age from youth through to adulthood and beyond. Everybody is here. I keep dancing even though I can feel that I am going to be sick at any moment. The deep roar between beats has been rising aggressively with every pulse of strobing light. It sounds as though it has overtaken the beat in its dominance and actually appears to be visually distorting the light around us by adding particles of noise to the air that break up the laser lights into fine grains of what looks like quartz

circling around the room in a spiral that makes me feel increasingly nauseous. Just as I am about to actually be physically sick everything goes silent and black.

When I feel well enough to open my eyes slowly and blink my vision back into awareness I see a tray in front of me and the beige fabric of the back of a chair. Somebody is placing a bottle of water in front of me. I turn to thank the air hostess and look down the aisle of the plane. It is not until the plane touches down that I think to check that my bags are on board which fortunately that are as they turn up on the baggage carousel in Sydney. Once we land I check the time on my phone and see a message from a colleague with a link to the video of my actions from the night before my walk across Shanbudia. I then see on my stomach a page of handwritten poetry delivered by someone with a note describing what they called a portrait of an eruption as they witnessed poolside that previous night. The cold morning air outside jolts my reflexes enough to get into a train that takes me from Sydney to Newcastle. Once home I embrace my wife and fall into bed and one day some weeks later I get out of bed and sit down here at my desk. Again it is early morning and my wife is lying on her side and turned towards our open bedroom window. We will have breakfast shortly. From a shelf above this desk I take down the small bee automaton that my late friend Les sent me before I met my wife. Its overlapping petals still unfurl beautifully into wings as it floats above my hand before I catch it and set it back down against the void of the table.

Les lived on a property with a timber mill on one side and a tractor graveyard on the other. The last time I visited Les he was unweaving a long spring from a coil of rear hydraulics on the back of a tractor rickshaw hybrid that had previously been a half dozen other types of farm vehicle before Les decided to pull it to pieces and build something new from scratch. There was barely anything left of it by the time I arrived after breakfast. I got the feeling he had been awake all night again. A mutual friend once looked at Les and I and said if he did not know us better he would assume we had completely opposite sleeping habits. Les was always known for skipping on sleep and staying up all night through most of our high school and university lives while I was a regular eight hours a night kind of guy. And yet according to our friend I was the one who looked full of manic energy and poorly slept while Les looked like he never got out of bed.

In many ways we were always polar opposites in our lifestyles and our aesthetics and how we fed on entertainments. I was afraid of living beneath powerlines due to their potential negative health consequences while Les smoked a pack of cigarettes a day. Les enjoyed bubblegum pop ballads while I listened to atonal jazz noise. I absorbed experimental literature and German philosophy while Les did the same with mathematics and engineering textbooks. But the point at which we over-

lapped as one soul was in our sense of humour and hence how we chose to mediate reality. We both enjoyed pushing the absolute extremes of comedy between us as a test of our ethics and how we were not going to compromise in the face of external power structures be they family expectations or the education system or society at large. This is classic adolescent development to be sure but for us it was also a line in the sand that we kept referring to as we got older. Whenever polite society would suggest a particular tradition or historical value or commonly held axiomatic space we would thumb our noses at it by drawing on the depths of our nihilism which acted like a black hole that would draw all other systems of belief inside and crush them within its gravity. Or its levity. It was often one and the same.

At sixteen we could taste the potential of the future and we found it bitter and fraudulent. When we were twenty six and looking out across a valley of chequerboard paddocks that echoed for a good fifty kilometres behind the Belt family home as Les locked the gate behind us and we headed down a broad brown grass hill we had mellowed somewhat. No longer looking for a cosmic fight with the fiction of reality we were content to put down arms and enjoy more naturalistic sensory pleasures. Les would go for bush walks that would last for days with only minimal formal camping involved as he would sleep standing up against a tree for an hour or two before walking onward. For my part I was increasingly fascinated with the minutia of nature amid the city and would pick up

berries and leaves from my walks around Newcastle to photograph and write about. At thirty six my primary interest in the natural world is now in reducing its romantic harmonic organic appeal and seeing it clearly instead as the central agent of universal destruction and chaos that cares not for the balance of life. I want nature to take up this heroic role not necessarily for the sake of its object oriented ontology but rather so it can stand up for itself against those who profess to be in control of the natural world and would seek to undermine its entropy.

In the video games Mario Brothers there is an angry sun that comes down from the sky and frowns as it tries to attack the main character. Sure this could be butchered as a metaphor for climate change but really I think this would be character slander to the sun. For the sake of assuring its good name in school house dictionaries and childhood encyclopaedias that depict it with a smile and the best of gas leak intentions I feel the sun should rather be portrayed with a visage of not even knowing we exist. Because we should be clear here. There is nothing in nature that speaks to the idea of life in balance. This is a human ideal and not a noumenal one. The longevity of our existence is neither here nor there in view of nature. This is what should be painted onto the walls of schoolyard murals. A sun that looks just like this. And I say that with a full heart and a child on the way. Like all of my waffling I wonder what Les would think of it now.

With a crowbar in one hand and a screwdriver in the other Les leant into my shadow and taught me how to

jab and twist the screwdriver beneath a fold of sheet metal on the underside of the tractor and then with one firm bang to dislodge the sheet and peel it away so that the electronics contained could fall to the ground. He passed me the tools and I did this a half dozen more times while he dismantled the steering wheel and gear sticks. Once this was finished we piled bricks beneath the shell of the machine and carefully removed its wheels and axles.

Les was fastidious about making sure enough bricks were positioned beneath the most volatile positions and that they should be stacked in a fine tessellating spiral at each juncture to take whatever uncertain downward thrust of mass the tractor would make when we removed the first wheel holding it above the ground. If I were responsible for this task I would have improvised what I thought would be a reasonable engineering solution and then with fingers crossed I would have hoped for the best. That is why I should never be asked to build a bridge or anything that puts physical life at risk. My skills were always much less refined than what Les had and as with everything in my life my creations suffer from my greatest weakness. That is my weakness is my inability to follow a process to the letter. I also consider it my core strength which is why in the spirit of never outlearning my old mistakes I am profoundly stuck with this one.

When I was young and learning the organ I would not learn pieces of music in the proper manner through rigorous and methodical practice by slowly playing a small sequence of notes and then expanding that passage and

playing more fluently until the piece was learned. Rather I would dive in and improvise what I thought the song should be and get most of the notes correct but a few would always be my own. In time the piece would get to a point where it was such an idiosyncratic version of what I thought it should be rather than what was on the page that it never really sounded like how the composer intended which was fine because I never really had any interest in staying true to the source material.

It is the same sin I have carried over to my professional work life when I have been set a task to complete and I think to myself that I am not really sure how to do it exactly but I am sure I can approximate a way using my own mashup box of multidisciplinary tools that while innovative are just not quite the right tools for the job. I get the job done sure but in the process I metaphorically bend all the screws and fittings into an unrecognisable shape due to having applied tools that were never meant to be used in this situation. So long as I have enough sticky tape to wrap around the end product I can keep it all in place and tick it off as a completed task. Apply this to every part of my life and you can see how things can quickly get messy and how for pathos there is never quite enough sticky tape to keep it all together. And yet as I keep saying this is also so often my ticket to success. The song I learn in my own way is different enough to all the other versions of the song so that mine often stands out. When asked if I can do a particular job I never say no because I know there will be a way to get it

done with my eccentric collection of tools and an eternal sense of yes. It is like Wagner says through Parsifal. The wound can only be healed by the sword that made it. Perhaps replace sword with sticky tape and wound with wound. That is why I am able to say yes to a conference invitation on the other side of the world even though I really have no idea what I am going to do or talk about. And it is also why I am so eager to get home once the event is over. Hopefully all the sticky tape holds. Again do not ask me to ever build a bridge or anything that requires the following of a process to keep everybody alive. I might not say no and my toolkit might make a bridge like you have never seen before but I would never suggest that anybody should actually use it.

After the tractor had been dismantled Les opened the back gate of his family property and we set off for a walk across the valley towards woodland on the horizon. I will tell you a funny piece of synchronicity. The conversation we had that day as we walked side by side with heads down in earnest dialogue was a mirror of what my wife and I were talking about just a day or two ago. I had shared with her a dream I had about our pending baby. The dream involved an ability I had to somehow alchemically turn one thing into another. In this instance it meant being able to turn our baby into a bowl of lollies. It was not intentional however. One moment I was holding our baby and the next they were a bowl of a thousand multicoloured lollies. Panicked by the sudden transformation I flinched and some of the lollies fell out the bowl to the floor. I

dropped to the ground to quickly pick up all the fallen lollies as I knew that in order to recreate the same baby it was important that all the lollies be put back in the bowl exactly as they were before. Who knows what might be modified in the composition of our baby if I was holding an incomplete or mixed up bowl of lollies. Mere seconds after I deposit the last of the fallen lollies back in the bowl our baby reappears and I scan them all over for any physical changes as a result of the lolly disaster but they look fine. What about inside of them though. Their organs and their thoughts. The whole experience was traumatising and yet when I told my wife she laughed like a village full of bells scattering birds into the sky.

The way this mirrors the conversation Les and I had that day was that we were talking about technology that had just been announced which would in the following decade turn into what we now know as CRISPR or in its full form the technology of working with clustered regularly interspaced short palindromic repeats in genes. This gene editing technology is all the rage at the moment for establishing revolutionary new modes of biological research and the future treatment of diseases. At the time that Les and I were learning about the technology the implications as they relate to creating designer babies were immense and yet perhaps no more so than the social evolutionary designs we create for ourselves when we select a partner to procreate with. I recounted for Les an article I had read that described how scientists had successfully removed the HIV virus from mice and as a

consequence those mice immediately demonstrated greater academic results. Whatever greater academic results in mice actually means. The consideration of how to determine which of our human properties should stay and which should be edited out of nature was something we debated for a dozen kilometres of grass field strips between harvest paddocks of cabbage and potato and the occasional fence line of cows and sheep who for all we knew the cabbages and the potatoes and the cows and the sheep may already all have been clones engineered from early prototypes of CRISPR for more productive yields.

My reading of Nietzsche always brought me back to the question of whether what does not kill you makes you stronger hence if you remove a natural complication from within the system of a living creature do you also remove a necessary impetus for the creature to overcome and grow into something more than it might otherwise be. Or is this profoundly naive and rather than seeing imperfections within us as tools to build character we should take the opportunity to remove all problems from our genetic foundations at the outset. Removing the potential of HIV from babies would surely be an obvious decision but then who knows what the unrealised consequences of this action might be.

Les wondered if he might be able to download the software for the beta version of what would later become CRISPR to his computer and port them over to an old video game console that could be tinkered with to allow biomaterial to be written on and for small medicinal tablet

like forms of compressed powder to be ejected from the cartridge slot on the console that if ingested could begin genetically hacking our bodies over time. I thought that sounded like a terrific idea.

After some hours of walking Les and I entered the previously distant woodland area seen on the horizon from his yard. I asked Les about this dense area of gum trees arranged in tight rows but he claimed to have never been here before. Come on. You are trying to tell me you have never visited this area in all the years you have lived here. Les was nonplussed. He said when he was younger it was too far to walk and when he was old enough to walk here he would always walk in the opposite direction. We would often walk together but mostly down the dusty roads that lead to his property so we had never ventured this way for this length of time.

When we were a half kilometre into the bush I heard a low resonant tone that sang across the floor of the area like a sustained arpeggio of wind held into the shape of a chord. Wandering further on we realised the sound was emanating from an old piano soundboard that had been left leaning against a tree. As the wind passed through it the steel string wires vibrated and released its song. How somebody had lifted such a heavy part of a piano here was almost inconceivable. The soundboard was flaking shards of wood all over the ground and the very frame of the board which had been rendered soggy after months of being exposed to the elements was already fusing itself into the tree it was leaning against. Bark from

the tree had started layering itself over a handful of the treble strings on the piano board so that when the wind blew there was not just the sound of the thick metal strings being extended into long and low harmonics but there was also an accompaniment of percussive bark rattle as it clapped against the piano in a manner that looked somewhat how you might burp a baby or as the wind dropped in intensity how you might rather rhythmically pat a baby to sleep.

This reminds me of an activity I demonstrated at my workshop in Shanbudia. I had brought a daffodil with me from a vase on a table in the hotel lobby and I showed how you could create music out of the noise of the city by using flowers as instruments. Step one is to find a pedestrian crossing signal with those big flat metal buttons that you push to let the traffic light algorithm know to eventually tell the cars traveling in a particular direction to stop so a pedestrian can safely cross the road. These flat metal buttons have a small hole right in the middle of them that allows for their installation and removal when utility work needs to be done on the crossing signal. Sometimes the hole is covered up by a thin metal tab bearing the logo of the city or the manufacturer of the crossing signal. Step two is to remove this metal tab so the hole is exposed. You will notice that the repetitive metronome style sonar sound the crossing signal produces is louder now that the tab has been removed. Step three is to take the stem of any flower with a bulb that flourishes its petals in a trumpet like structure and to run a thin needle or similarly thin and

sharp device through the middle of the stem and all the way up until you pierce the bulb of the flower. Sometimes a thin wooden skewer can do the trick. Step four is to then place the stem of the flower into the hole of the metal button on the crossing signal. Most stems should fit just fine but if you need to make some incisions to allow easier insertion than now is the time to do so. Your final step is to make sure the stem is securely poked into the crossing signal so it will not fall out and to then listen to the resulting sound. Instead of the round sonar tone previously heard from the crossing you will hear that it has now been transformed into a reedy brass sound as if a small bugle is being played. Toot toot. The only problem my workshop participants could see with this activity was that flowers were generally no longer available in the city. They noted that all the trees had already been rendered as holograms and as for flowers they were only available in five star hotel lobbies and upscale funeral parlours.

As the density of red gums reduced and the woodland bush dispersed behind us I asked Les about the approaching fields. They are of a highly manicured variety not at all similar to the rough tumble of paddocks we pressed alongside to get into the bushland. Again Les appeared to have no idea what he was looking at as he grimaced and stumbled out some words like well it must be out the back of or perhaps this is where no that would be further south ah. We both spotted what looked like chicken coops and greenhouses right on the crest of the field which we agreed we should explore. While we

walked there Les pointed pieces of nature out to me like a bee dancing around a tumble of lavender. He said watch the looping patterns it moves through. This is how they will teach programming languages to children in the future. Watch how the wings open in a cascade and vibrate with a softness so foreign to our current mechanics. I said oh I reckon you could recreate those physics with an ace of spades and a rubber band and Les laughed and shook his head. He said this landscape is becoming increasingly low polygon. The warmth of the sun feels so geometric.

Les described how he wanted to start generating cryptocurrencies out the back of his yard with a few weatherproof microprocessors in plastic bags connected to wind turbines he would stick on top of stakes by the fence line. I thought that sounded like a great idea. When we squinted into the low clouds hanging above the couple of hundred metres before us we were convinced we could see streaming data pouring down from them in some sort of augmented reality sun shower. The data precipitated shapes that we were trying to decode. One of the shapes was of a battleship. Another of a nurse wielding a sword. Plates of food and visions of sunset that populated into dustings upon the fields before us. An alligator clip and a sundress to compress.

At the time of this walk I was a fortnight out from getting married. The wedding venue was curiously enough probably accessible on the other side of a mountain that sat in front of the street that ran to where Les lived. When I say accessible it would take three hours as the bird flies

from one side of the mountain to the other and whether anyone has actually ever climbed and journeyed across the whole mountain I do not know.

My wife and I some years later on a wedding anniversary went for a drive up part of the mountain from the side we were married on and made our way up as high as we could to a radio transmitter sitting on a pile of rocks but there was no clear way to make it from one side of the mountain to the other. When we bashed our car back down the mountain across the cragged mess of rocks and shifting layers of dirt that inspired us to promise each other we would never try driving up or down somewhere like this ever again we eventually got to the bottom and looked back to the radio tower only to see just how little of the mountain we had actually traversed.

On the side we got married the valley is a floor of red dust. We had our ceremony in a little vineyard oasis. With the background of warm red landscape against the milk white wedding dress my wife wore with her red hair in a frozen architecture of twirls and me beside her wearing a combination brown pinstripe suit and top hat our wedding photos look like a beautiful medical bandage wrapped around a historically scenic biscuit tin.

The speech that Les gave on our wedding night became a thing of legend while the words were still tumbling out of his mouth and into the unsuspecting anticipations of everybody in the room. Not many of my family members or even my friends for that matter had spent much time with Les but truthfully even if they had it

could not have academically or spiritually prepared them in any capacity for this speech. It was pure Les through and through to have imagined up such a bundle of hypersurrealism that he unwrapped fish by whistle by dada saddle.

He was never one for the spotlight in the centre of the room and was much more in equilibrium between the scrap metal in his yard and the shadows of his room where he counted numbers quietly to himself. Les had told me on more than one occasion that he had never dreamed and could not imagine what a dream was like. Listening to his best man speech then was again a moment of revelation as the contents of what he spoke about were just so phantasmic. I am going to try and summarise his speech but there is a caveat here. Even though it was the thing of legend and universally enjoyed and talked about by everybody who attended it was curious afterwards just how many different interpretations of what Les spoke about in all manner of variations were discerned.

For example my summary of his speech was that it was a tale of time travel in which he unfurled many different directions my life with my wife could proceed from here depending on what occurs during the wedding. The most seemingly inconsequential happenstance or transgression from a wedding party guest or alteration to the environment of the area could lead to any number of future outcomes within our married life. He listed potential triggers and the causations that might follow and each one was more hilarious than the last. Say my wife is served the

fish and I receive the chicken and we decide to swap them. Les then went on to describe the chain of events that would follow from this with a level of detail I remember thinking at the time was dictionary like in its objective descriptive quality. His tone was suited to a series of matter of fact definitions being read out like a recipe or an encyclopaedia entry and it just added to the uncanny hilarity of the speech.

And yet here is the thing that I have often wondered about in years since. When I asked another good friend of mine who attended the wedding what he thought about the speech he similarly said how much he enjoyed it but he did not think it contained any mention of cause and effect time travel. He said the speech was about how many times Les had tried to write the speech in all manner of variations but ultimately failed at each attempt and how the speech itself was just a combination of misfires that became increasingly desperate as he was still trying out different versions of the speech before standing up at the table to deliver his talk and even during the talk he was improvising potential pathways the speech should go.

I told my friend I remembered nothing of this and then I asked him to describe the tone of the speech and guess what he said. Like a dictionary. He said and these were his exact words that it was like Les was reading from a dictionary of different definitions for what a wedding speech should be. In these current times there would have been a dozen different video recordings of the speech all uploaded to the internet but this was just at the dawn of

media virality and as such only photos of the night remain. I do like to think that if a dozen phone recordings of the speech were shared online that while yes each version was indeed filming Les at the exact same moment from different vantage points around the room you would not think this was so because when you viewed each of the versions uploaded his speech would be completely changed from one file to the next even though the length of the speech would be exactly the same in each and the laughter in the background would all rise at the same timestamped moments in each video. He was nothing if not a quantum lad.

Thirty minutes on across the tidy fields and we arrived alongside the tall mesh structures that we anticipated were chicken coops and greenhouses only to realise were actually butterfly enclosures filled with hundreds of white and orange and blue winged butterflies dancing around in tapestrial spirals like a gentle cyclone of flying flowers. We stood in front of the fine mesh of the enclosure and watched as the butterflies blinked around the muted light of the area which was covered from above by a dark tarpaulin. As I think back to each coloured flash of butterfly wing I am reminded of that phrase I have used elsewhere to describe how I seek good feelings from the world in a manner that I analogise as a sequence of lights and colours and sounds and gradients of tactile feedback to stimulate just the right sort of emotional stew in my head. For all I know this is the moment that triggered that response for me as I remember so clearly how beautiful

and entertaining on such a protosensory level these tiny hurricanes of white and orange and blue were as they turned on and off and teleported from one side of the enclosure to the other in miraculously graceful sleight.

Les and I were so transfixed with this display in front of our eyes that we did not see the half dozen people walking from the back of the enclosure to the front door where a little lady in her fifties or sixties with a soft marshmallow face and golden coils of hair reached out for the door and cordially welcomed us in to the enclosure with the rest of the group and said how pleased she was that we found them in there. Ah. She looked at Les and I with gentle directness and said that she could not quite remember how many people they had staying with them for the weekend but it was a pleasure to finally meet us and would we mind introducing ourselves to the others already here. We guardedly proceeded to do so before we shuffled in amongst the small group and learned from the lady about how the proboscis of a butterfly can be coiled up and stored against its head almost out of view after it is finished sipping nectar. She then said that we should not feel the need to hide our own proboscis when we drank nectar later which we laughed at with complete sincerity.

After we left the enclosure which we learned was called a conservatory the group retrieved bicycles that were parked nearby. The lady with the soft marshmallow face said to Les and I oh you did not ride here no matter and then she went into a little toolshed beside the conservatory and pulled out two rusty bicycles with

attached foam helmets which Les and I thanked her for as we mounted the bikes and rode down a long chartreuse slope across a spread of dandelions and leaping aphids behind the rest of the group in an exhilaration of air pushing against our faces. We looked at each other and laughed again with the most unfiltered light filling our heads. Five minutes of downhill riding was all it took to reach a property enveloped by tall birch trees which provided a privacy barrier around the perimeter. The only break in the line of trees was a small gate with a metal plate attached that read Silver Horizons Wellness Resort.

We pushed our bikes into the property and saw ten neat wooden cabins dotted around a yard half the size of a football field with stone pavers leading up to and between each cabin as shared pathways. The lady with the soft marshmallow face told our group that we would meet in the hall at six for dinner and then she leaned in to Les and I and said that the cabins on the south side of the yard were prepared and if we could just head down there and select which ones we were staying in and then let her know our cabin numbers at dinner she would note it in her records. Les and I chose cabins next to each other and I can remember reclining back on the daybed beneath the open window in my cabin and thinking I had never felt a mattress so soft in my entire life. The sun did not take long to set and it was only for Les knocking on my cabin door that I did not sleep through dinner.

We walked along a white chalk pathway between loose soil and freshly laid turf to a freestanding hall where

other resort guests were gently filing in. The hall was illuminated with faint orange salt lamps and candles in hurricane cylinders. The kind little lady with the marshmallow face stood at the mouth of the room and welcomed us all in and told us to sit anywhere we liked along the long wooden table configured in the middle of the hall. There were a half dozen wooden chairs with high backs and cushions on each side of the table.

Les and I sat on chairs that faced each other at the far end of the table. Next to Les sat a lady in her say forties or early fifties with shoulder length hair that ran from cherry blonde to fog grey in a spectrum of light that shifted in uncertain ways within the dimness of the hall. She wore bright red lipstick and had cheeks that connected to her nose in ways that I can vividly remember but can barely describe with any accuracy the manner in which the slouched and languid trajectories of her cartilage filled me with a sense of magnetic calm that I kept returning to throughout the night.

Part of me wondered and hoped that perhaps Les and this lady would become intimate by the end of the evening for reasons I can now barely attest to without feeling utterly immoral. Even at the time as I ran through a potential list of diagnoses or life antecedents that might have lead this lady to seek time in a wellbeing resort I felt repulsion replace whatever fetishistic whimsy I was projecting as atonement for having created a teenage fiction out of the existence of someone I knew nothing about and did not have the resources to engage with on a

reasonable human level. Still I did hope that Les might strike up a dialogue with this lady as I always enjoyed the rare occasions I got to see him talk with a stranger.

Les had a conversational ability that I have never seen anybody else exhibit to such an extent of mastery where he could be utterly polite and proper in his dialogue and manner in a fashion that would forever take me by surprise as it displayed a cortisol maturity within Les that I certainly never had at that time and that none of our other friends seemed to possess either. And yet on the turn of a coin Les would surreptitiously inject a line of conversation into the grace of formal small talk that would be of such a gutturally shocking nature that his conversation partner would not have the processing time to evaluate the magnitude of what had just said before feeling the need to give a prompt neutral response lest the structure of the cordial social situation be threatened without resolve.

For example I remember an evening towards the end of our high school days when we attended an open day at the university to get a sense of degrees and careers that might be of interest to us. While I spent my time looking at the ground rather than into the faces of the university representatives wearing academic and business attire across the quadrangle I heard Les ask a question about engineering to one of the lecturers there that showed all at once the level of both intellectual and life sophistication that Les could bring with him as a future university student to which the lecturer answered and in turn generated a mature back and forth on the topic of design principles in

engineering that left me feeling completely out of my depth on just about every cognitive and social level possible until I heard Les ask the lecturer about whether ethics classes were part of an engineering degree and then proceeded to describe the creation of a machine so cruel and repulsive that I felt like I was committing a crime just by listening. I knew from the faint change of tone in his voice that Les was doing this for my purpose as a display of exhibitionism to show what he could get away with saying to somebody in a public situation like this. We would laugh about it later and imitate the manner in which the lecturer tried to provide a friendly consolidating statement to Les whilst reaching for some red emergency button to alert campus security.

As a line of brown rice and salad and cut glasses of water appeared on the table in front of us in the hall and the kind little lady with the marshmallow face began the proceedings by inviting us to practice a meditative breathing practice before dinner I was unsure if Les would be engaging in conversation with anybody tonight. He was suddenly looking so utterly morbid that were it not for the near silent breathing of the hall I would have asked if he wanted to get out of here.

The kind little lady with the marshmallow face stood at the foot of the table with her eyes closed and her hands beside her apron dress and said the first breath is just a breath. She breathed in through her nose and out through her mouth and we all followed suit. Next she says that the second breath is an opportunity for your entire body to

relax. I breath in and rest my neck back against the chair and on the out breath I give my body permission to sink downward with gravity as if my bones were a mess of heavy wood felled from antique trees. On the third breath we were instructed to invite happiness into our minds. I smiled and tried to feel the resonance of this in my head as some sort of physical echo turned inward. The fourth breath was a chance to be kind to others and the fifth breath was a chance to be kind to ourselves. Or perhaps the fourth and fifth breaths were the other way around. Either way I followed the directions and found the exercise rather enjoyable. I remember feeling a bit silly as if I might start laughing at any point with no disrespect intended towards the meditation but rather at the bizarre situation that Les and I found ourselves in.

The whole thing was just so strange and yet at the same time it was nice and kind and very relaxing and I remember thinking it would give Les and I a terrific story to repeat and chuckle about on the way home. When I looked across at Les however I could see that he was not in any manner finding this experience as light as I was. On the contrary his morbid expression had now turned utterly frustrated. His eyes were still closed although it is more accurate to say they were clenched tight as he breathed in through his nose and out through his mouth and formed the meditation instructions with his lips again and again in the same repeating sequence as we were just taught. The first breath is just a breath and then he would say the second breath is an opportunity for the body to relax. But his body

would stay rigid like a block of concrete. His mouth would form the words the third breath invites happiness into the mind and he would breath in and out and try to smile but instead only a pained grimace would cut across his face.

I could not work out what was going on with him and it started to scare me a bit that he was taking it all so seriously and seemingly finding it so difficult unless this was all just a pantomime to shock everybody with. As much as he did like to push the envelope of social expectation and good taste at times this appeared too authentic to be for show. Les really was having a sort of inward aimed panic attack trying to perform these meditative rituals. I reached my hand over and knocked on the table in front of him and asked if he was alright. The lady with the uncertain hair looked at him with some concern as well. Les opened his eyes and looked at both of us with a sort of quiet turmoil that hit me so hard that I later internalised it as a new emotion within my own catalogue of feelings that did not exist until that moment. Years later and I still fundamentally associate intense feelings of private desperation with the precise look that Les cast across the table on that night.

After dinner we were offered the chance to remain in the room and chat with others or to find a mat in the corner of the room to rest or meditate on or if we would rather we could take a stroll back through the grounds of the resort to our rooms to retire for the night. The kind little lady with the marshmallow face extolled on the virtues of both good conversation and an eight hour sleep

and said that we should not feel guilty about choosing either at this point in the evening. For my part I felt like getting a good sleep in. I ask Les if he wants to head back with me but he does not. The lady with the uncertain hair has her hand on his now and she is talking in earnest tones about what he can do to get better at meditation. She says there are special techniques and even a few surprising life hacks that she can teach him. As much as I want to stay and listen there is a hit of jealousy that strikes me and forces me to remove myself from the room so as to not say or do anything I will regret later. I thank the kind little lady with the marshmallow face and wander back to my cabin. The night sky has a couple of pin pricks in it that reveal flecks of sparkling white thrown from whatever source of overclocked energy burns behind the universe.

My cabin was dark and warm inside. After I fell down on the soft bedding and looked up at the roof I thought about where I was and the myriad fantasias I could fall into that night. I think back to the meditative dinner and replay my visions of Les treating the breathing exercises like a complex mathematical equation that could unlock some satisfaction for him if only he could know more. As well I think to my own timidity and status of perpetual observer who could not even hang around to make social niceties with the peaceful guests of this wellbeing resort. My head goes through recent weeks and months of similar activity and as I sink into increasing unconsciousness I project visions onto the warm darkness of the room of who I want to be tomorrow and in six

months time and a lifetime away.

Who will I be when I am married and who will I be when I am a father to a young life emerging into a consciousness of their own. The further I stepped into the depths of every blackhole minute the more I remember feeling like a young version of myself was crawling out. A five year old version of me perhaps in youthful clothing and face and step passing along a path somewhere towards some sun bleached horizon. And now the boy fragments into a fan of transparent silhouettes as thirty different versions of me walk away from each other. I was taken by an intense hit of psychic trauma as I wrestled with this feeling of being disintegrated. My head in the wellbeing cabin felt like it was filling up the room like a cloud of dust being reconfigured in the air in such a fashion than if it ever came back down to my shoulders and reformed in some physical manner it would not be the head I had before. And yet this is exactly what happened. My head experienced deposition and phased from a billion atoms of gas to a single solid skull and I felt at once a peace that sent me almost straight to sleep.

My head was not my head anymore. I know it was a head that had consumed everything that could ever exist like a sponge soaking up all future possibilities. This was an everybody head and I had nothing to fear. I was the universal embodiment of static uncertainty and it felt for all the world like love.

In this state of ease I retreated into a favourite idle entertainment of the time in which I imagined setting up a

bunker safe house in an empty tennis court administration office during the midst of some urban warzone. I was creating makeshift defence systems out of resource disjecta. Nets that would bounce back enemy artillery fire. Tennis ball cannons that would fire volleys of scrap metal towards incoming militants. I was bunkered down with a redhead nurse of course as I had been injured in a firefight earlier that morning. She was tending to my wounds as I prepared our defences.

It was at this point in the fantasy that I remember hearing what sounded like two wild dogs outside my cabin getting into a fight with each other. I jumped up and peered into the shadows out my window. There was definitely movement out there. All I could really see though was some spectrum of light that shifted in curious ways between cherry blonde to fog grey. And there was bright red as well and cartilage that ran in a trajectory from cheek to nose to another nose and another cheek pressed against a face filled with raw mathematical anger trying to breath the first breath and then the second breath and his body was like a brick in heat wrapping itself around her oscillating bloom of airborne moth seeds tumbling down octaves towards the eternal thief.

The next morning Les and I receive a knock at each of our cabin doors. First mine and then Les two minutes later. It is the kind little lady with the marshmallow face but this morning her expression has considerably blackened. She directs us both to leave the wellbeing resort immediately and to be thankful she does

not bill us or even call the police for our dishonesty. I thank her for the experience and Les and I open the gate at the back of the property and commence the walk back to his place on pass the butterfly conservatory and chequer-board fields and the bushland with the piano soundboard.

In the distance there are mountains that will never be reached. Not by Les or I or anybody else. They are background graphics rendered to necklace the border of this land but they are not accessible or even intelligible on a phenomenological level as they are visible without actual form. The mountains exist in an unplayable area. There are cabins and sheds in the distance too that look real but were you to approach them you would realise they are empty on the inside. Not empty as in lacking in furniture but literally empty like an impossibility. If there is something in there it is beyond our comprehension to realise it. Like the mountains. We are too human to approach them.

On the walk home Les and I barely spoke. He was so quiet I could hear that he was far away from me and instead was deep behind the fine spinning gears of his pondering interiority. In letters back and forth after this time Les was singularly focused on explaining to me his progress towards engineering a machine that could assist with the breathing exercises we were taught by the kind little lady with the marshmallow face. He designed a mechanism not dissimilar to an iron lung that would help facilitate the right length and breadth of meditative breathing while another piece of the design would focus on turning off the mind. This was an element of the build he

tinkered with for some months after I got married. He sent me designs for a cow press type device that would gently squeeze the head until consciousness was muted. Another design was like a fish bowl filled with lights that would overstimulate the brain into switching off for a time while the iron lung component of the build would keep the breath on and on in a perfect geometrical form. He built this version and tested it out but said it gave him something resembling a seizure rather than a state of zen.

In one of the early letters Les said that the answer to silencing thought is to use numbers. Counting breaths and sheep and so on. The ultimate meditation was a numerical equation that took the mush of our thoughts and straightened them into whole numbers. I never saw the final design for the completed machine but I know that Les achieved it. He found success and with it the formula for peace.

This is the transcript of my eruption. As mentioned at the beginning of this monologue I was sent a video upon landing back in Sydney of my entire performance from that dinner over in Shanbudia. Every sullen drawl turned maximalist tuttiwaffle noun and verb string from my word volcano is preserved on there. The software I used for transcription is quite spectacular at accurately identifying words and actions and this is a good and necessary thing as there is no way I was able to watch the video back myself to add any visual notes. Sharing this is a critical part of the surgery that this project represents.

Some context again before the transcription. As I have mentioned a couple of times this occurred on the last night of the United Nations workshop week and those of us who had presented across the days were gathered for a celebratory dinner before flying home to our respective countries the following day. My colleagues there were all a good bunch of people enjoying a few laughs and drinks poolside. Everyone was easy and relaxed. There was good food and people were smoking from hookahs and the music was a cool blend of slow acoustic and dubplate moombahton that set the tone for the sort of pristine conversation that bubbles to the top of the most successful social occasions. That is until I opened my mouth. I will let the transcription speak for itself but give time to remember just a few of the bigger contextual issues here. It was Dec-

ember and I was already burned out from a massive year and this week of questionable work in a far away land was a bridge too far for my resilience. Add to this powder keg the flame that was the devastating news report of the urban terror attack back home that was reported on that morning and you have a fair sense of my unravelling. The previous fifty thousand words in the build up to this transcription can account for the rest of what led me to be who I was at that moment.

Why this was filmed at all is a mystery as there was nothing of interest taking place at the time but then again perhaps this is exactly what would inspire someone to begin filming. Start the camera rolling when there is an absence of content and see what happens. The camera is the ontologiser. Like the dog that starts salivating and in doing so causes the bell to ring. My colleague from Holland was the one who asked me the question that commenced my eruption.

She asked How is your novel going.

,.-'~'-.,_

Transcription OCRecord Beta 3 171218 Eruption.txt

Generated in 529 seconds

Feedback? E-Mail: [support address]

AltVis OCRecord 1a

Est thirty five year man brown hair beard sitting at a table with group of people. Middle of frame. Pose head in hands

Voice: *There is not much to say. A Complicated Surgery Will Take Place On The Beach Tonight. A story I started writing the day after I met the woman who would become my wife. When I began writing it I had grand plans as we all do when we start a new project. I imagined a jazz noir retro cartoon style aesthetic with steampunk car chase style action going on in some urban war zone where a fetishised version of my now wife then medical girl I had just met at a video game arcade tournament would appear as a sword wielding nurse while I was some floral shirt wearing unshaven tough guy engineer with blindfolded eyes and an external pacemaker blinking on my chest while my body is lodged in a wheelchair due to injuries caused by reasons unknown. For the past decade and then some I have tinkered with the story on and off with a view that one day it would be something perhaps. But it never will be. I know that now. There is a major structural issue that I cannot resolve. Part A of the story ends in a particular way in a particular location at a particular time of day and then Part B continues the action but in a completely different way in a completely different location at a completely different time of day and it just makes zero sense whatsoever. But I am stuck with it. I wrote it and now it cannot be unwritten because that is who I am. This is not the first time I have written something that completely failed. When I could see that Beach Surgery was sinking I started to write another story called Sunny Danger Time. It was a complete disaster. The story started with a young woman. Always a young woman. She is*

attending some event at the local council chambers. All of my stories are set in Newcastle on the same streets with the same buildings. This was our town hall otherwise known as the Newcastle council headquarters. It is a donut shaped building and I dreamt once that the obelisk on top of a hill that overlooks the city suddenly lifted off from the hill and flew across the city released from its gravity until it saw the council chambers and pitched in from the sky down into the middle of the donut shaped building and then a few weeks later boom the council is pregnant. This has nothing to do with that. Our protagonist is attending an event at the council and somehow gets into an argument with the mayor of Newcastle. They wrestle on the balcony and then whoops the mayor slips over the balcony and falls to his death. Our young woman protagonist is understandably distraught and while she is in this state a man of course always a man walks over to her and says that he can help. His talent other than offering to save women in distress like some loathsome version of Mario taking it upon himself to quote unquote save Princess Peach is that this man was able to see cause and effect consequences to an extreme degree. He was a chaos theory guy. If you blow in the ear of a dog drinking from a water bowl in the middle of town you can set in motion a series of falling dominoes that will eventually cause the entire city to erupt into complete anarchic disarray and as a result it would render the death of the town mayor as a very minor event compared with the urgent need to get the region under control. Through

chaos you will be saved was the motto of the story. As Mao once said everything under heaven is in utter chaos so the situation is excellent. Some of that way of thinking made it into Beach Surgery. Fetishising violence and anarchy and brute survival between uncertain lovers in the face of a disintegrating society. But oh did you hear the news today. The shooting that took place. I have no words and I have too many words all at the same time. Did you hear about the manifesto the shooter posted online before the attack. He listed his references. The media and the ideas that inspired him and guess what. He stared into an abyss of entertainments that passed his time as he clicked to subscribe and allowed the next clip to roll unfettered and would you believe it the abyss decided to stare right back into him. And into all of us. How could I write a story that plays into this same abyss. Sword wielding nurses and hand cannon guys. Heaven forbid I write a story with a resolve to do some social good. That would be too much for me. Pass the ethics and hand me the megalomania.

AltVis OCREcord 1b

Est thirty five year man brown hair beard stands up at table.

Middle of frame. Gesture hands outstretched

Voice: After the shooting of course rising out of the echoes of the ricochets the pundits and their fetid voices were immediately in heat. Everybody retreated into their ideological camps. The shooting was a result of failing national mental health initiatives and the accessibility of

guns and increasing extremist race related violence and open borders signalling the immigration crisis caused by geopolitics that emerged out of the recent global economic downfall caused by a disturbing reliance on credit and the digitisation of money that rose out of the tech bubble and the faith we put in globalisation and international communication networks financed by advertisements everywhere so that bad foreign actors are now utilising the full functionality of social media to create propaganda that is being used to quote unquote sew discord amongst the population of Western democracies by causing unrest with regards to unresolved malignant fears that strike at the apparent heart of survival a la genetic purity a la religious dominance over the female body a la sexual identifies and all the rest but here is the thing. They are not trying to sew discord but just the opposite. Certainty. That dirty word. It is certainty that they are trying to feed into our veins. The message we see in their propaganda is that life is a collection of solid facts and you only need to use your reason and your logic to see that one and one make two hence you should own a gun and you should take aim at the big other. Let me tell you right now that the way we need to respond to all of this is through a fervent embrace of absolute uncertainty. To make love to the unknowable. When entering a conversation our first statement should be that this is all a language game of fictional narratives playing on our human desire for patterns and as such we choose not to take a side. We will not dirty ourselves by cozying up to piles of concrete facts because they are

nothing more than a series of tones organised in such a way as to replicate the feeling of truth that awoke in our gut the moment we realised we needed to feed and to cry in order to survive in a world we could objectively feel beneath us and could subjectively interpret through our nerves but could not in any manner decode further than this because our hardware forever blocks out all the real stuff that must exist beneath the surface. I reject everything except the real that must exist in order to support our illusions. You know when I created Beach Surgery I thought I was doing what all artists propose. I thought I was creating a better version of reality. A more real version of the fiction we stew in during our waking hours. But the truth is that art always fails by necessity at living up to the absolute perfection that is our existence. How can it create a model of reality that contains all the cracks and flaws of our universal foundations. Each word we write in fiction is too whole. Too full and complete in and of itself. Words are no relations of the noisy lights inside my head. Try as they might words cannot fail enough.

AltVis OCREcord 1c

Est thirty five year man brown hair beard walking across multiple tables. From left to right of frame. Gesturing hands above head

Voice: Blessed are the mountainsides void of all words. Blessed are the dust clouds kicked around to signify nothing. Blessed are the dingoes who turn their back on polite society. Blessed are the quick response codes that I

see printed on the backs of black laced silver wyandotte chickens marching around our yard. Blessed are the octopus girls who want to hold your hand hand hand hand hand hand hand hand. Blessed are the samurai who train as medical professionals. Forget Beach Surgery I have an idea for an opera I am going to start working on. Here it is. Three parts. The protagonist is a young boy. Son of a single mother who used to be married to a Street Fighter video game champion until he passed away. In her grief the mother buys an old Sega Mega Drive console and learns to play Street Fighter. She then prints out a map of where all the characters in the game live and she begins traveling with her son and her Mega Drive to those countries on the map to battle local Street Fighter enthusiasts. Meanwhile her son finds it difficult to maintain a constant physical form. During a libretto it is described how while rushing through a train station one evening the boy turns very small and desperately hangs onto the end of an umbrella his mother is carrying only to turn minutes later into a gigantic form indistinguishable from the hotels necklacing the station as his chest becomes a sandstone block and his head a framed window. In one of the countries they visit say Brazil a bottle of water is accidentally knocked into the Mega Drive causing its circuits to fizzle. The competitor the mother is meeting with gathers a disparate range of electrical components together and quote unquote fixes the console. However when she travels to her next country say China and plugs the Mega Drive in it starts acting all weird and the player

she is there to battle points out that her console is now a CRISPR module that can edit genetic code. They say see the biomaterial goes in here and you can print tablets that change genetic code by doing this and then the mother looks at her child and then end of scene. The second part of the opera is focused on the son who is now a septuagenarian music director for a local school who are putting on a performance this very night but guess what. The pinball machine that is to be the musical centrepiece is missing so he travels the city looking for it. He tracks it down late at night in the front room of a pizzeria and decides to push it across town to the performance centre. As the pinball machine rolls ever faster down bitumen pathways the old man needs to run to keep up with it. They are headed towards the ocean and as the jangling percussion of the mechanics inside the machine reach their cacophonous peak the man releases the table from his grip and watches as it soars off the end of a jetty and crashes into the dark black mass before him. The table is quickly gulped up by the water but as the curtain falls on the close of this second act it is possible to see a wave of red neon light rippling upwards in ever fading beats that emanate some ambient pulsating cry that the man instantly recognises. The third and last part of the opera will portray the daily exercises of a large red robot who presides as a protective guard over my home town of Newcastle. Say the robot came to life out the back of a gymnasium and an electronics repair store in a pile of treadmills and weight machines and alligator clips and

circuit boards. It practices defensive and offensive battle moves every morning before the city wakes. Walk forward jump forward jump straight up spin into a crouch block then stand at ease. Then one day during a terrible flood which actually did take place in our city a couple of years ago a robot from an opposing city attacks Newcastle and tries to steal the heart that beats in the middle of our donut shaped town hall. A massive battle takes place on stage which is surely the apogee of the opera with the choir at full strength and the strings resonating wildly as our big red robot defeats the invader but in the process becomes irreparably damaged by the flood waters. The rain continues to torrent down and for weeks the robot does not turn on its systems for fear that it will short circuit itself. Beneath a fabric canopy the robot sits and watches the city fill up with water across a period of perhaps a thousand years. Maybe more. Behind the torrential rain the robot can see a silhouette moving towards its position through fragments of light stuttering in front of its visual sensors. Then there is a loud popping sound and everything goes silent. Lifting open the jaw of its mouth the robot feels its insides fill up with sparking water. A voice synthesiser within the robot says the name of the silhouette and this time forever and ever she answers. Curtain down. End of opera. I already have the main thematic melody line ready to go. G crotchet and then quavers Eb D Bb F and then G crotchet again in the treble while the bass walks down from G through minor chords with a sustained seventh every four repetitions. Here let me sing it for you.

AltVis OCREcord 1d

Est thirty five year man brown hair beard stacking chairs on a table. Other individuals incl. forty year old woman blonde hair glasses incl. forty eight year old man no hair incl. twenty five year old woman burqa sunglasses incl. {click for more} hands out towards man in focus. From left to right of frame. Dancing now

Voice: Say the robot dies and a baby bursts out of its shrapnel and into the world. Within a few weeks I will be a father. I will be out of Shanbudia and back home in Hamilton and my dear Katita and I will have welcomed a new life to the planet. Can I share something with you all as I climb this stairway to heaven. I have always felt that the decision to remove a life from the world is less a concern than introducing of a new one. It is absolutely unfathomable the impact that a new life is going to have on the environment and history and civilisation. And really why do we do it. Who would bring a new life into a place that none of us understand. I heard someone compare being born to starting a new game of Pac Man. You appear in some weird maze world and you are ravenously hungry. Luckily there is food everywhere in the labyrinth that you navigate in order to eat everything you can but then you see the ghosts. Every story is a ghost story. I think the Pac Man metaphor is ridiculous. How wonderful if life was so concretely presented to us as a simple map to navigate and complete. Maybe then we would not have to create narratives about children and genetic editing and pinball machines falling into the ocean and robots seeing the silhouette of their mother from all those years earlier

with her voice the only music possible and her heartbeat the central pattern in our life that we will never be able to move outside of. What can I bring to the world. Have you heard the news today. I just want to help our babies not fall off some crazy cliff.

AltVis OCREcord 1e

Est thirty five year man brown hair beard sitting on a chair on a table. Middle of frame. Crying

Voice: I just want a world where children are born and accepted as perfect and provided a life of perfect equality. Think of children in years gone past who had to wear glasses to school and were called four eyes. Now we all wear glasses and nobody would think to assume such a cruel taunt. We heard one of the city directors here in Shanbudia say just the other week how we should plan new city features for healthy children and not to create a reduced experience by overly accommodating those with disabilities. Unbelievable. Such a callous thing to say. And you see this attitude towards intelligence all the time. Those of us here who are making our livings by using our heads. We take such pride in our capacity to think. To think very prettily. My whole problem is that I cannot think beyond this. What about the divisions we make on intelligence. The lines in the sand between cognitive assessment results that children are subjected to if they walk or talk a little late. Which intelligence quotient do they slot into. Between ninety and hundred. Fifty to seventy. Less than twenty. More than one hundred and

thirty five. And the value that is placed upon this. It is as if we primarily value children who we think will contribute economically to the society. Hence we value children in purely economic terms. Did you see the press conference given the other day by whatever his name is. The internet money security transfer billionaire. He announced his new company building brain implants that connect to a computer interface allowing humans to merge and communicate with artificial intelligence. They are talking about uploading memories to the cloud and providing people the opportunity to convert thoughts into text but of course the real goal is scalable intelligence. Plug your brain into software that breeds a chess machine with an encyclopaedia and see how high your intelligence quotient can go. Then we will see what a normal distribution of intelligence looks like. Suddenly you will have those who can afford the technology with a distribution far outside the one hundred range. And what will that mean for the rest of us. The bell curve will get pretty cozy at one end where we used to be so explicit about the lines in the sand between one hundred and seventy and thirty five. What if all of us who cannot afford the technology are pushed into the quote unquote limited mental ability range. Will they put us in institutions and deny us jobs because our economic potentials are so reduced now. In a future where automation has replaced most of our jobs only those billionaires with the newest brain machine interfaces will have a seat at the table. Of course cognitive assessments are total rubbish anyway so what does any of this matter.

I just care about love. Say no to categories of intelligence. To thesis and antithesis between left and right. On and off. A and B. Between a man who is not a father to one who is. Listen.

AltVis OCRRecord 1f

Est thirty five year man brown hair beard climbing up on stacked chairs on table. Uniformed staff of sort hotel or restaurant reaching out to him. Other individuals incl. miscellaneous sitting standing laughing filming. Top of frame. Gesturing to the ground

Voice: Leif is out of his wheelchair and has discarded his pacemaker and almost has his blindfold off. Katita is leading him down to the beach. She takes off his blindfold and he is in an outback hospital. A surgery in the red desert. How does A become B. The ending is fine. Look I will show you how it ends.

Now the visual transcription glitches out at this point and cannot decode what is happening so let me put myself through the trauma of describing the next minute for you. I reach down from the mountain of chairs I have assembled on the dining table while the hotel staff try to coax me down and my colleagues are split between worry and euphoria as I grab two long glass hookahs and place them under each of my arms. Next I grab two candles from the table and a bottle of vodka. It is difficult to see my eyes in the grainy video but they honestly look like two black holes that have decided to split the sun in two and consume both halves equally. I shove the candles into the hookahs

and pour vodka into them both. In an intense burst of starlight I fly off the table and into the sky as the alcohol reacts with the fire and the gas in the hookahs turns them into ridiculously dangerous jetpacks that propel me from the chairs on the table across the dining area above the stunned heads of everybody in the area before I crash down in the hotel swimming pool. At this point the cameraman runs over to the pool to try and locate me but I am already gone. There is a water slide built into the pool that runs down to a second level. The camera shakily heads down a nearby stairwell only to find wet footprints leaving the bottom of the slide and heading into the hotel lobby to the elevator where the footprints disappear and the camera turns off.

Yesterday morning our baby was born. She arrived early. Both baby and mother are doing well. I am sitting here with notepad and pen in hand on a bench just outside the special care nursery where our little girl is sleeping. Nearby in a couple of rooms down the hall my wife is also sleeping and recovering from her surgery. All is right with the universe and I am going to tell you why. Not only am I filled with all the very best physiological chemicals that must bloom in a parent when they hear the first cry of their offspring but I am also at ease in a way that I can only describe as harmonic. It scares me to use that sort of word and the language it intimates and in truth I assumed I could only feel this way when alone with my left right footfalls dissolving into the back roads of some nameless city that I have chanced upon as if in a daydream. And yet here I am feeling balanced.

After our daughter was born I stood over the plastic tray she slept in for five hours and I sang her little songs. I felt her breath on my fingers and passed the soft of my knuckles against the round of her cheeks and I forgot how to think about the future. There was nothing to be gained in anticipating the world to come lest the current moment be squandered. To recount how all of this happened I should start by noting that where we are is a good five hours away from Hamilton. This hospital is not our local one and not at all where we expected to be. We

are in the shire of Port Rhombus amongst the mangroves. Even now I can hear seaplanes landing at the docks outside the window at the end of the hall bringing new patients and visitors to the ward. The most important thing to say about all of this is that I now know how one thing becomes another. How side a leads to side b and how life emerges from darkness and how a man becomes a father.

As I have mentioned previously when I arrived home from Shanbudia our child was due to be born in a matter of weeks and all I could do to help prepare was fall expired into bed. According to the advice given by those who have done all of this before it is this period of time before your baby is born that you should be resting as much as possible in order to be ready for the sleepless years ahead of you. And yet I was not sleeping in order to invest hours of unconsciousness that I could draw upon later. I was sleeping because I was physically and psychically empty. When I started to drag myself around the house with a glass of juice in search of occasional bouts of sunshine I penned the reflective notes here with a view to decode what lead to my Shanbudia eruption. Minutes after finishing the concluding notes beneath the transcription of this eruption my wife popped her head and her pregnant belly into the studio and asked if I would like to take a trip up to Port Rhombus where an artist she admires was holding an exhibition. I checked to make sure she was fine with the long drive away from home only a few weeks out from her anticipated delivery date particularly as we would be staying overnight. She booped

me on the nose and said she had already packed an overnight bag. We left within the hour and booked accommodation whilst driving. My wife would never admit to it but the act of going on a short holiday was surely less about seeing an art exhibition so much as it was about getting me out of my head and into some externalising actions. And this is exactly what it did. I threw a hearty brunch into my head at one of the rest stops along the way and felt better than I had in months.

For drives like this our preferred soundtrack is the entire back catalogue of The Beatles from the harmonica sweeps of Love Me Do all the way to the guitar solos and cosmic philosophy of The End. It takes just under ten hours to get through The Beatles official albums which means a trip to and from Port Rhombus can neatly divide the listening experience in half. We usually just get through Revolver as we arrive at our regular accomodation.

Within an hour we had breached the boundary of Newcastle as cityscape turns oyster farm and coastal reed shelf. Restaurants with names like The Salty Dog appear two hours into the trip with dotted bars of sheet metal shanty homes appearing at curious intervals displaying out front all manner of improvised sculptures made out of what look like surgical plaster and wet pulp that become increasingly archetypal as the mangroves swallow the yellow pastures that up to this point have been holding the road together. Soon the highway becomes shadow and the surface beneath the car feels like the pressure between magnetic poles. My wife has her window down and her red

hair is a full volumed flag blowing in the draft to represent the true intention that nature has for the colour red which is not to stop or be cautious but rather to proceed with the abundance of healthy flowing blood and ripe strawberries and the starting pistol of sunrise and the most explosive spices that time can grow. Her stomach beneath her spaghetti strapped black singlet is being pushed outward by tiny hands and feet from within.

Since returning from Shanbudia I have barely discussed any of it with my wife so I tell her some of the work I did over there. I gloss over the eruption by putting it down to one of my social quirks that barely rates mention and instead I talked about a bizarre synchronicity I came across regarding a makeshift community in the Shanbudia desert not dissimilar to the sheet metal shanty towns we have been passing on the drive. This community in the Shanbudian desert is a direct cultural mirror to a makeshift collective hidden on one of our local beaches just north of Newcastle and given the nickname Tin City. Two dozen or so Novacastrian men who lost everything in the Great Depression decided to get together bits of corrugated iron for walls and ceilings and conveyor belt scraps from local mines for flooring and build a commune for themselves deep in the sand dunes at least a good hour from local roadways and so far up the coast that most beach visitors would never get close.

After the Great Depression the war came and the men all left for overseas. But here is the bizarre part. The men from Tin City who went to fight over in Europe and

survived all stayed together and after the war they travelled east across the continent through Turkey and Syria and tried to set up home there. There was nothing in Australia for them to return to in terms of economic prospects and they had no family waiting for them. These countries were not ready for new settlers however as the close of the war was only the beginning of new tensions in the area. With little resources they pushed on down through the mainland and came to the desert in Shanbudia. Fearing the desert might be the end of them the group of men collapsed beneath the sun only to hit something hard beneath their faces. It was tin. Broad corrugated sheets of it. They dug down and found homes there that were almost identical to the ones they had created on the beach in Australia.

But get this. Because of tensions in the region the men who used to live in these improvised desert homes in Shanbudia decided to take their chances and leave the country together to make a life somewhere else. An opportunity came to emigrate to Australia and after arriving in Sydney they caught a truck heading to Newcastle with a promise of fruit farming and other labour work to help get them started but things were not so easy when they arrived in the city. Old wounds from Europe were still fresh to the touch in the diasporas forming around Newcastle. Those with Greek heritage were setting up in Hamilton and those with Italian family were establishing lives in The Junction and so on. However these men from Shanbudia were on the outer and could not find a valid space in which to put foundations down. Down

and out and increasingly desperate they tried their hand at fishing and camping on the beach. The men walked far up the beach coastline from Newcastle to Stockton when they saw a glint of metal poking out from some of the sand dunes. After digging out the homes that were created there they took this as a miraculous sign that this is where they were meant to live. And so the community of men who originally built these homes on the beach now lived in near identical homes built by men in the desert of Shanbudia and those men hence chanced upon these homes in Tin City and established themselves there.

It has only been in the past twelve months that both communities have realised this ecstatic truth. A film crew was creating a documentary on it while I was over in Shanbudia. They were staying in the same hotel that I was in. I told them I was from Newcastle and they could barely believe it except that of course they could believe it because the whole premise of the documentary is on the synchronicity of events like this that make you question whether a cosmic clockmaker is orchestrating all of this stuff or whether we just have a really poorly developed sense for how statistically likely or unlikely events like this are. My wife did not say anything throughout the story. I am not quite sure if she believed it or not. She just smiled and looked out the window at the passing fields of saffron on the left and the mangrove channels on the right.

There is a stretch of coast up here before you get to Port Rhombus proper where the land heading inland enters a declivity of shadowed pastures that never quite

seem to catch the sun. By the time high clouds pass the fields in the morning and the afternoon light descends behind crowned rock canopies the world has turned so far on its side that it is only the river system across the highway that catches any direct heat. This is where the thin rows of purple saffron flower are grown in the region. Fragile tissue paper petals reach towards where they last felt warmth from the atmosphere perhaps from a passing satellite or a rocket expiring its fuel while their stiff yellow spice rods jut out the middle and throw wide the red floral stigma ribbons that hold their position from the inside like a celebration frozen in a state of hung architecture.

On this occasion my wife says to slow down and we pull off to the side of the road and get a closer look at the flowers. Usually if we stop like this beside a field we would make sure our car windows were wound up due to spots like this being such a haven for bees so I am surprised when my wife opens her door and walks towards the field. She implores me to get out and look as well. I can see what she is referring to as I unclip my buckle. Today this field is not filled with bees. It is filled with hundreds of tiny mechanical drones.

The first thing that gives them away are the wings which are much longer than those on an organic bee although the transparency of the material these wings are made from make it hard to see where they finish and begin. Their wings appear to form a broad uppercase letter X that flutter up and down many times a second only coming to a pause as they land inside a saffron flower at

which time a little silver canister descends from the rear of their body to release a little perfume puff of gas into the plant before the wings vibrate again and carry it to the next flower. This is happening all over the field.

My wife asks me to kneel down and pick up some of the yellow saffron stamen that has been blown over to the fence line. I pass it to her and she examines the crush of sunlight in her hand. She presses it between her fingers and paints yellow lines on her cheeks and shoots me a smile. As she examines her gold dusted hands one of the drones hovers over the fence and into her hand. It reclines its wings and we hear its little motor winding down. The wings look like the material made for space blankets. Its head is a marble of tiny sensors glistening green and black. I think of the small aluminium bee automaton that Les sent me as a gift all those years ago. His design with its delicate overlapping pleats of metal was much more beautiful than this drone and yet of course the version that Les created was not intended to be economical. The canister on the drone does look very similar to the one that Les attached to his to use as a fuel source rather than a tool of pollination.

There was a period of a decade or so that I could not find that little bee. Thinking back I only recently found it again after my wife let me know she was pregnant. I went through my drawer to find a calendar and there was the bee just sitting there. While I look at the yellow lines on the face of my wife I fantasise a narrative of me traveling on the train with it on that afternoon after we first met returning to see her again. The same day I began

writing A Complicated Surgery Will Take Place On The Beach Tonight. Perhaps as I exited the platform that evening the bee Les sent me bounced out of my bag and activated its autonomic flight response and hovered above the ground for a moment before being blown away by the draft of the train pulling out of the station. Say the bee flew into nearby pasture where it was discovered by a local farmer who tinkered in engineering of an evening and had a revelation that led to the creation of these saffron field drones. But then how did it return to me.

I ask my wife if she can see any text on the drone that might reveal where it was made or a brand name or similar. As she lifts it towards her face the sensors on the bee illuminate in the direction of the yellow lines painted on her cheeks. The canister of perfume beneath the bee opens up and releases a puff of clear gas that clouds my wife as she coughs and drops the drone on the ground causing its wings to break off. It got in my mouth she says with a look of extreme distaste. She spits on the ground in an attempt to get out of her mouth whatever was just put in there. We look at each other and she laughs although I can tell how unsettled she is by what has just happened. I get a bottle of water from the backseat of our car and she gargles and wipes the rest of the saffron from her face before we get in the car and head back up the highway.

We talk baby names. A name that is cute for a baby and socially acceptable as a teenager and respectable as a professional walking into a meeting handshake at the ready. We discuss whether we should stay local after our

baby is born or whether we might use the event as impetus to travel the country. Give baby ambient stimulus of the sensory events that happen around the country. Nurse baby beneath the satellite dish range at Narrabri and sleep in the sunken gardens of the Umpherston sinkhole. It would be a parenting challenge but maybe that is just what we need. Throw some more complexity and unknown onto an already unknown and frightening situation of raising a newborn. That is how you push yourself to do great things.

For money we talk about collaborative projects we could work on. I like the idea of running a pirate radio station with my wife where we read whatever local newspaper we come upon in the town we are staying in and provide uninformed phenomenological commentary on the news contained within. Spontaneous reactions to local events in the most sentimental and patchwork of ways. It could even be soporific like so many whispering voices. We might run the radio station from the back of our car with a simple transmitter and data streaming service that could send it to the internet where patrons from across Australia and the world could subscribe on a monthly paid basis.

My wife likes the idea of keeping things offline and perhaps collaborating together on some lectures on our areas of specialisation infused with our learned personal revelations about parenting that will hopefully heighten the relevance of our notes on inclusion ethics and art theory and the like. Perhaps we could just offer gardening services as we travel around the country. Whatever we do

however will need to maximise the time we can spend with our daughter. This could be the foundational push behind us wanting to move around the country. To be out of reach of a boss or a corporation who wants to squeeze the life out of us for money at the expense of giving our full and dedicated love to each other for as many hours each day as possible. I visualise my recurring fantasy of escaping to a snow blown city in some anonymous unnameable country where we live in secrecy in a tall apartment building that is closed off to the world which we only depart from beneath the cover of snow and darkness to spend time in an abandoned empty shopping centre together as a family untouched and out of sight from the talons of society.

It is worth noting that in the days since this moment on our drive my dialogue with this escapist fantasy has lessened as I no longer feel the same fear and dislocation that fueled the original vision. Traveling the country might be fun to be sure but I no longer feel the need to escape with my wife and child to an unidentifiable building void of sunlight far from home. Progress.

On our right we pass a weatherboard waterfront hotel with a pier attached to its side. A half dozen boats are moored there next to a seaplane from which a bride and groom step out. We only see them for a second before they are in the distance blocked by a sudden wall of pines. My wife starts laughing. She says do you remember when we stayed at that grand old hotel on the beach during a stop on our honeymoon. You sat watching our wedding photos materialise above the beachhead in a downpour of rain. I

was printed on a matrix of raindrops you told me later. My red hair against the red desert sand in my white dress looking like a surgical bandage wrapped fresh around a bygone whisper. Do you remember you described me that way. She laughs again while I keep my eyes on the road. You were playing pool she says. Or snooker. And just as you were about to sink a low ball into a pocket I cast my sword out across the table and sliced the ball in two like an apple being halved for a tiny horse. A flash goes off and you grab the neck of either the cameraman or his friend as one of them clocks you in the jaw and you roar at them to show you the photo they took.

My wife giggles and says even though they were just photographing me and my sword you took them outside in the rain and beat them up. She says and then you were locked out of the hotel for the night and you were trying to find me through the windows. After you grew however many storeys with your sandstone chest and clockface gaze you stepped back to get a better view of the hotel and one of your feet pushed straight through the jetty in a shattering and a splintering of antique trees that sent you falling into the waves. She describes how my body welcomed the water to seep between my errors in such a way that left a tattoo of my form on the surface of the waves. We checked out of the hotel early next morning.

This is what my wife recounts between laughs. It is all completely foreign to me. Where did this completely false vision come from. Yes we did stay at a hotel on the beach and we did receive photos from our wedding while

we were there and yes I did get into a fight with two local lads who were sneaking photos of my wife but. Well actually the falling through the jetty part is accurate too. And my body turning to a sandstone chest with a clockface gaze. I remember the hotel looked like a skull with lights illuminating the eyes and teeth. Her aim with the sword across the pool table to slice that red ball in half was extraordinary. But the rest of her story and the way she is giggling in the seat with her feet up on the dashboard gives me pause for concern.

By the time we stop at a massive crater filled with dark grey water called Bowling Alley Point for a planned picnic lunch my wife is fast asleep. I hesitate to wake her after the peculiar past thirty minutes of bizarro laughter and sudden unconsciousness but perhaps this is all the more reason to rouse her for some food. Her stomach has two feet pushing upwards from behind the navel. I tickle the bottom of these subterranean feet and my wife slowly opens her eyes. We sit and look out at the lake and estimate how many bowling balls could fill it up. Say the crater holds one hundred thousand millilitres of water and the average bowling ball is. No that is not the way to solve it. What about we treat it like a container of jelly beans. First we need to work out how many jelly beans would fit into a bowling ball.

There are no trees surrounding the lake but rather there are concentric rows of dried grass that fan out towards dusty paths that lead to either the highway or offroad passages of gaps in distant mountains. No other

cars are parked in the area and the only sign of life in view is a cormorant with wings coloured like fresh tar spanning itself into flight from one side of the crater to the other. We watch it fly and try to decode whether it is real or mechanical. Its body is the size of half a bowling ball. My wife rubs her stomach and says she is not feeling great. She tries to eat a devon sandwich but only gets a few bites into the white bread before shelving it back in our esky. I suggest she tries to get a little more sleep if she feels like it might help and we head back on the road now only an hour from Port Rhombus.

When we do roll into the shire the township is very quiet. The past few times we have been up here have been during holiday periods when the streets are filled with families treading footpaths to get ice cream and see a movie in the old Art Deco cinema opposite the beach. Today however there is nobody in view. This lack of human life in a built up area appears to be a common trope for what I psychologically and aesthetically seek from an environment and while that is completely accurate it is also true that Port Rhombus was on this day actually really void of any lived activity. Traffic lights changed and the waves crashed on the shore and clouds drifted high above and at one point some tennis balls fell down some steps leading down from a church to a paved shopping plaza but there were no children present at the source. I heard a dog barking in the distance although it could have been the sound of wood falling behind a building site. Even my wife was not really present here as she slept while I drove

around to find the art gallery we were here for.

The artist we came to see is a nationally renowned illustrator of books for children. She had a dirty impasto sweep to her brush that created highly stylised dreamscapes overlaid on everyday settings. The children in her artworks created fantasy masks for themselves through which to mediate reality. I enjoyed her art thematically as much as my wife was inspired by her technical accomplishments on the page. When we pulled up to the art gallery my wife woke in a groggy state and before her eyes could even focus properly she said the exhibition is closed. We walked up to the front door and sure enough a note tacked to the door apologised for the inconvenience but due to circumstances beyond control the gallery would not be open again until next Monday.

Through the glass we could see some of if not most of the artworks hanging on the walls inside. Perhaps this was enough. We could see the paintings perfectly well from outside. In fact there was something even more pleasurable to me about looking at the paintings from this distance. If the content of the paintings were a level of fantasy that children construct in order to process their waking life by creating a gap between what is real and a filter of that real then these closed doors provide a further gap through which to filter the subjectivity my wife and I came here with today. As a young lad I used to imagine having a light switch in the house that would have three levels to it. The up position turned the lights on and the middle position turned the lights off and the down position

turned the lights to a deeper quality of being off.

A bit dazed we head to our hotel to check in. It is around three in the afternoon so if we check in and play a game or read a book it will soon be time for dinner and an early night. The concierge desk always has a couple of interesting boardgames that we borrow when we come here. Across the road from the hotel is an observatory that we attended some years ago for an event. It was a public lecture on orbital resonance and the sort of harmonious mathematical ratios between moons and planets that keep everything in order up there. The moons of Jupiter for example were shown on a length of string against a blackboard at the front of the room to demonstrate how a perfect ratio of one to one and then two to one and then four to one accounts for the distance between moons Io and Europa and Ganymede.

A guitar string was shown too as held by an assistant to the lecturer which was plucked as a whole string and then plucked at half its length and then again at a quarter of its length to further show the mathematical principle of the ratios involved but also to make a not so subtle allusion to the music of the spheres. I remember this idea interested me a great deal and I went for a long walk on the beach afterwards with my wife talking about the supposed harmonies between planetary bodies or whether this was a misleading idea and that the inherent dissonance and atonality and noise of the universe is being ignored in favour of this idea of cosmic balance. She laughed and said that I will not be happy until everything is meaningless.

Besides she said. Everything is silent up there.

My wife is more alert now after her snooze from Bowling Alley Point although now she almost seems too alert as if her sensory system has heightened to an agitated state. I ask her if she is ok and she says she just has a lot of energy for some reason. She pokes through the pile of boardgames at the concierge desk and says that nothing there interests her and then says how about we make our own game. We have not even set the bags down in our room when she runs over to a pad of paper and pen beside the telephone and takes it to the dining table near the window overlooking the beach.

My wife says how about we make a game about our daughter. Her living in the future as a little girl. Say a cyberpunk outback city desert fantasy world. She could be a hacker. Quick give her a name. I start to slowly pronounce the word Air to see if it turns into something else and my wife with her bright and wide watermelon eyes like green flowers drifting through space in front of the sun as it bursts on through the petals of her eyelashes from the inside of her laughing mind leans in across the table and grabs my hands and says yes what if her name was Error that is a perfect name for our future little hacker. Why my wife is thinking about computer hacking I have no idea. In my early high school days I used to be wrapped up with a few hacking collectives but it is a period of my life I have barely talked about to anybody. I remember learning to hack into the local public library system to change when books were due back so I could erase all my

late fines but that was about the extent of my capacities.

Then my wife with her empathy decoding skills seemingly turned up to eleven at this point in her increasingly manic state says to me no silly not computer hacking I mean reality hacking. What if she learns to hack into the fabric of reality and change it around. Or what about this. Now my wife is laying out sheets of paper from the pad across the table in a tessellating board of squares to draw lines across to connect each of them together as if projecting onto the table some cartography revelation from a scale map of a city.

Now keep in mind that this is my retelling of what happened next and while you will not know this in your bones as much as I do it was as if during this time my wife was talking through me. Her ideas were of the sort that I would usually waffle on about. Not her. I could barely believe what I was hearing but then as you will read soon I did not even have the opportunity to properly question or process any of it in real time. This is me recounting words in my own voice that I remember my wife saying which were as it happens words that in all likelihood came straight out of my mouth like a ventriloquism performance of a shared simulacra. In other words. Prose.

She says what if the game is for two people. The parents. One player slash parent takes on the role of guiding Airah who is a young human girl on through her regular waking world on the lookout for cracks in the fabric of reality that she can dive into and get her hands around the raw code of the world to manipulate. There

could be goals like she has to hack into the code of global ecology and politics and economy and so on. But then the other player slash parent at the same time is guiding Error who is like the existential inverse of Airah. They are the same girl but whereas Airah is a little human girl living in the regular world with the ability to hack into the code of reality what if say Error was actually a digital angel of some sort who was created within the raw code of the world and is on the lookout all the time for cracks in the code that she can corrupt and infiltrate in ways that bring her into the regular waking world where she learns to impact life in more face to face organic ways. The object of the game is to work out which version of our daughter is real. Is she really a living breathing human girl who is part of the world we see around us who has the ability to look underneath the hood of what is real or is she a unit of meaning that exists in some unreal sublimated meaningless language void fiction beneath everything and.

And then she passed out. My wife fell to the ground and I phoned for an ambulance.



Waiting for an ambulance in a hotel room in a city hours from home with your pregnant wife unconscious on the floor is quite an experience. The elderly hotel manager and his wife come into the room wearing what look like full beekeepers suits. They look like astronauts and were totally frantic. Had we been drinking or doing any drugs.

When did we arrive. Who were we. There was a part of me that wanted to reach for wherever my wife left her samurai sword to take a swing at them both with all their questions. Who did they think they were bursting in here to our room uninvited when our daughter was busy working out which side of reality she was to be born into. Because that is what the paramedics alluded to when they arrived. That this may be the start of an early labour.

They moved the hotel manager aside and carried my wife out on a stretcher covered in a bed sheet to the elevator not the stairwell and then to the ambulance where we rode together to the Port Rhombus public hospital. One of the paramedics asked if we had family in the area and I told him no. They all lived five hours south. She said they could transfer us back to Newcastle depending on the condition of my wife. It could just be blood pressure or a reaction to so much car travel or it could very well be labour related. It took less than ten minutes to get to the emergency entrance of the hospital where my wife was wheeled into a room for observations while I was told to get a drink of water and stretch my legs and they would update me when they knew more.

While my wife was initially a nurse in training when I met her at that video game tournament all those years ago she never actually continued with it as a career. She transitioned from nursing to primary school teaching to psychology to art therapy and just before she fell pregnant she was setting up a theatrical set design business. Nursing was her initial passion but her heart kept

breaking when the elderly people she was primarily caring for would pass away. She would have made an amazing nurse. Her bedside manner was so kind and so suitable for what was required by the patient whether they needed quiet solemnity or efficient professionalism or cordial optimism she could shape her empathy to suit the situation in a way that always left an impression on me the few times I observed her from a distance. I would go to pick her up from work sometimes and would wander the halls of the hospital much like I did after leaving her with the doctors just now to be examined. Sometimes I would trek around the hospital basement where a five hundred metre long hallway contained just about every spare surgical bed and trolley in the place. From there I would walk past a mostly empty staff cafeteria that backed onto a rock garden. Through the rock garden was a lecture theatre and a medical intern training room with primitive robotic patients and plastic dummies to perform cardiopulmonary resuscitation on. Eventually I would end up in a foyer area near a pharmacy and a bank that housed a white baby grand piano.

During late nights when I would pick my wife up at two or three in the morning I would sit down at the piano and play quiet songs when nobody was around. Moonlight Sonata and Air on a G string and Gymnopédies and all the classics I could recall. As I walk around this hospital in Port Rhombus I realise how very different it is structurally to the one my wife used to work at. I wander down a corridor with photographs on the walls by student

radiographers until I get to a doorway that leads to a little garden courtyard area with a ten by ten metre patch of grass and a few benches nestled beneath foliage against the surrounding walls.

The afternoon sun is beginning to set and it feels as though this courtyard has been constructed just for this time of day. Through the open roof of the area the sun is glazing itself onto seemingly all four walls of the space at once even though it is setting neatly at true west and so should only really be hitting the eastern windows. The whole area takes on an embracing visual warmth that feels like it would be perfect for taking a nap in. I proceed on through the courtyard however to an adjacent room that turns out to be a small medical library presumably for staff at the hospital. The titles of the books do not read as suitable for any layperson not looking to understand the composition of particular genetic markers or ligament restoration techniques and for that matter the library and the courtyard are not positioned near any typical public waiting areas. I have walked quite a zigzag trajectory to get here. For a moment it occurs to me that any medical staff who might be looking for me to provide an update on my wife would be unable to find me here but then I see the title of a book on the shelf that I recognise as one I borrowed from a local library many years ago. It is a book on a mathematical proof by Austrian mathematician Kurt Gödel. So odd. What are numbers doing in a hospital.

I take the book from the shelf and walk out into the courtyard to read it. Mathematics has never been a

strong point of mine but I am endlessly fascinated by it. Les was a natural star at the subject all through high school and while I could not keep up on a technical level I did enjoy discussing mathematics on a conceptual level. Gödel was perfect for this sort of thing. I had not thought about Gödel or his theorems for a great many years. Over twenty surely. Reading through the first few pages of the book I began to remember exactly what it was about Gödel that I was so fascinated by. He created two theorems that are called his incompleteness theorems. Although this will be a complete bastardisation of his work I will summarise the basics of these theorems as follows. His first theorem demonstrates that within any formal arithmetic system there will be number statements that might seem true but which cannot actually be proven to be so. The second theorem builds on this to then demonstrate how these systems of mathematics can hence never demonstrate their own consistency and as a result are forever incomplete.

As a young lad seeking any tool possible to undermine the legitimacy of systems of established knowledge this felt like absolute dynamite. Numbers were always seen as infallible. You cannot trust your perception but you can trust in one plus one. Now however there was this sophisticated mathematical tool that was showing how incomplete and uncertain the world of mathematics actually is and how any attempt to render the system as complete is bound to further highlight its unavoidable core of incompleteness. And it is not a failing of those who first established these formal mathematical systems. On the

contrary it is because they did such a good job that they are as incomplete as they are. It is not a bug but rather a feature of mathematics. It is how things are meant to be. Eternally uncertain and incomplete. Try to look at the nose on your face by using your eyes without the help of a mirror or camera. It cannot be done. You might think you can but it is just a smudged transparency. This is Gödel.

After thinking about all this I have a peculiar thought in my head. It feels like a train has just travelled past my head and all the cutlery and plates behind my eyes are rattling. I put the book back in the library and try to make my way to the ward my wife was taken for observations. Through the courtyard I come across a paediatric wing of the hospital I do not remember passing through on the way here. There is a classroom and a recreation room for kids who are patients here at the hospital. It looks as though in the recreation room the nurses are putting on a dance party for a dozen children aged between say six and fourteen. The nurses have an old record player they are loading classic disco dance records onto. I recognise one of the labels on a record being put back into its sleeve as Outa Space by Billy Preston so I stop to watch through the door for a moment.

They seem to be having some trouble keeping the record spinning. The nurse puts on the record and the kids listen to it for a few bars before really getting into it as they start wildly dancing around the room. When they start dancing however they stomp the floor so much that it shakes the record player and the needle falls off the groove

of the record. The nurses start the record again and sure enough the same thing happens. When the record starts to get just the right beat going for the kids to dance to they destroy the song by dancing to it. Outa Space fails due to how groovy it is. The fact it is such a dance worthy tune ensures that it will not be able to be danced to. Perhaps there is another record that is somewhat dance worthy but not so much that everybody actually wants to move to it. Some happy middle ground. No. Come on. The record either inspires dance or it does not. If it does not inspire dance there is no point in putting it on. But if it does inspire dance then it cannot be danced to. Or maybe there is a way for these children to learn to dance in perfect synchronisation with the rotations of the record beneath the needle. If the children could dance in time with the slight fluctuations rising and falling from the vinyl then maybe they could avoid shaking the floor and knocking the record out of its groove. I picture the record going around and around in circular revolutions and the children dancing in similar geometric loops that weave together with the music to create some sort of perfect harmony.

It is at this point I experience a moment of cognitive clarity unlike anything I have experienced not only in weeks or months but possibly across ten or twenty years. Suddenly my head feels like it is new. Of course. This is how one thing becomes another. I rush for a bench a few metres down the hallway while reaching into my pocket. In the anxious scramble that followed my wife passing out in the hotel room I pocketed the pad of paper

she was using for the boardgame. For evidence maybe.

I tear a strip from the paper and put the rest in my pocket. Thinking about the record player spinning just now I create a loop with the paper. And now think about Gödel. The face that cannot see its own nose. Things that are true but forever unprovable. Impossibility and uncertainty built into possible and certain systems. I turn one end of the loop into a Möbius strip. A one sided shape with only one boundary. I trace my finger down the surface of the strip as it twists beneath itself and continues on the other side in one smooth motion until returning to the starting position. Trust me when I know how this will sound but I honestly started to cry. This is how one thing becomes another thing. It is when two is actually one. Every coin is one sided. Holy shit. I was going to be a father.

I stand up and start power walking down hallways to find the room where my wife was being examined. It all makes sense. One continuous surface that connects and loops everything together. When Leif is stumbling down the beach with Katita and she takes the bandages from his eyes they are both just sliding down the Möbius strip across the sand and into the desert where reality continues in one gentle unceasing flow. At the end when Leif flies and crashes back to earth and Katita tends to him and lifts him up into the wheelchair. She pushes him up to the top of the carpark and looks over Newcastle ready to do it all again. History as a Möbius strip. It rhymes as it repeats and passes over itself in one eternally recurring wave.

Now listen. I well know that I am having myself

on. All this rubbish. Applying mystical revelations to a strip of paper that I am using as a key to unlock doors in my mind. I know fiction when I smell it. But this is what makes it resonate all the more. These are the models we live by. The metaphors and the shapes that we keep in our head are the ones that teach us how to survive. They are road maps where every avenue is both fiction and not. For me the map I needed to find was one folded over on itself in a satisfyingly analogous way. Geometry as analogy for how we walk to disappear into the revelation of being human. Like I have said before the truth at the centre of the world is always only an echo rising from the centre of yourself. And now I could hear the echo spiraling and honestly it felt like the tactile gradient of a hug.

Around the corner of a hallway leading to an administration foyer a nurse comes up to me and asks if I am me. I say I am and she takes me by the arm and marches in the direction she just came from. She speaks with measured urgency and says the reason my wife passed out earlier was that she has indeed gone into early labour and at this stage she will be giving birth to our baby within the hour. Without breaking her pace the nurse turns back and looks straight into my eyes and says it is very important that you be honest with us. When doctors examined your wife they found a chemical residue in her mouth that they have been unable to identify. They think it might be a kind of pollen.

Within seconds I am changing out of my clothes and putting on medical scrubs and being led through doors

into a birthing suite. I see my wife in a surgical gown sitting in a wheelchair. Red tinted lights in the ceiling throw hibiscus patterns down on her gown. She is wearing a heart monitor that blinks on her chest and she has a blindfold across her eyes. The nurse explains that she is very sensitive to light at the moment and they will keep the blindfold on until after she has given birth at which point they will remove it so she can see our baby. This will prevent damage to her eyes. I stand behind my wife and hold her tight as I push her wheelchair into the next room and she holds my hands so tight it feels like her bones are going to fuse into mine.

The violence of the birth feels so far from any semblance of entertainment that it gives me hope. As our baby is being removed from my wife a shockwave resonance catapults everybody backwards. For an instant our baby is shot into the air whereupon she cries and lingers in limbo before gently floating like a feather back down above my wife where this redhead listens for the rubbing of matter against space and instinctively holds her hands out to catch our daughter in her descent. The medical staff gather themselves and finish the operation. I cannot stop smiling. Our daughter is so beautiful. My wife is glowing. A nurse hands me a little sword as she brings our baby girl over to the side and asks if I would like to cut the cord. Over the mouth of our daughter a doctor places an oxygen mask. The first breath is just a breath.

It sounds like waves crashing upon the beach.

We are home now from Port Rhombus. Three weeks have passed and while my wife and daughter sleep I am pottering around the desk where I first started to write these notes. The only thing left to mention is the little poem that some stranger left on my lap when we landed in Sydney after the trip home from Shanbudia. I have it in front of me now. It is written on paper with perforated lines like a notepad that can be cut into strips. The poem leads with some introductory words written in very small and nearly illegible handwriting that I will paraphrase. Essentially they mention how they were staying at the same hotel with my colleagues and I. My dinner entertainment poolside performance made such an impression on them that they could not get it out of their mind. To their surprise I was on the same flight to Australia with them. For the duration of the trip they tinkered with a little poem that tried to sum up what I was trying to say during my eruption. They close by thanking me and wishing me good luck for the future. Being completely transparent here it is not out of the question that I wrote the poem myself in some deep sleep delirium somewhere over the Indian Ocean. Certainly the content of the poem is something I have believed for a great many years and said aloud many times over. And yet perhaps I should just put that down to the viewer. The messenger.

Here is the poem:

You never outlearn
the old mistakes of your youth.
They are your first love,
your footfalls of truth.

-----8<-----[cut here]-----

I will finish by saying that I plan on taking a little trip inland shortly. Just for a few days. A couple of years ago I learned that after Les passed away his parents sold up the family property and moved far west of the state into the outback. I never really spoke to his parents after his funeral service. There are things I would like to share with them about their son that I now feel ready for in a way that I was previously not. I feel as if my inside is more fully connected to my outside if that makes any sense. Communication comes easier now. My eyes may never quite be the exploding stars of my wife or our beautiful little daughter but these days I feel like they are no longer concrete roundabouts on the outskirts of some industrial sector of the city not yet populated. Before our daughter was born my wife and I would entertain ourselves by walking around the streets here in Hamilton picking up little objects to put under a microscope on our dinner table. Now when I walk I feel like I am rather magnifying myself. A map of my head filling up the lost streets. Maybe the poem is correct in that you never outlearn the old mistakes of your youth but in all honesty I tend to believe they were never really mistakes to begin with.





Craig lives in Hamilton, New South Wales with his wife, daughter and son. This is potentially his first novel.

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